

THIS NUMBER CONTAINS A COMPLETE STORY OF 40,000 WORDS.

THE LONDON READER

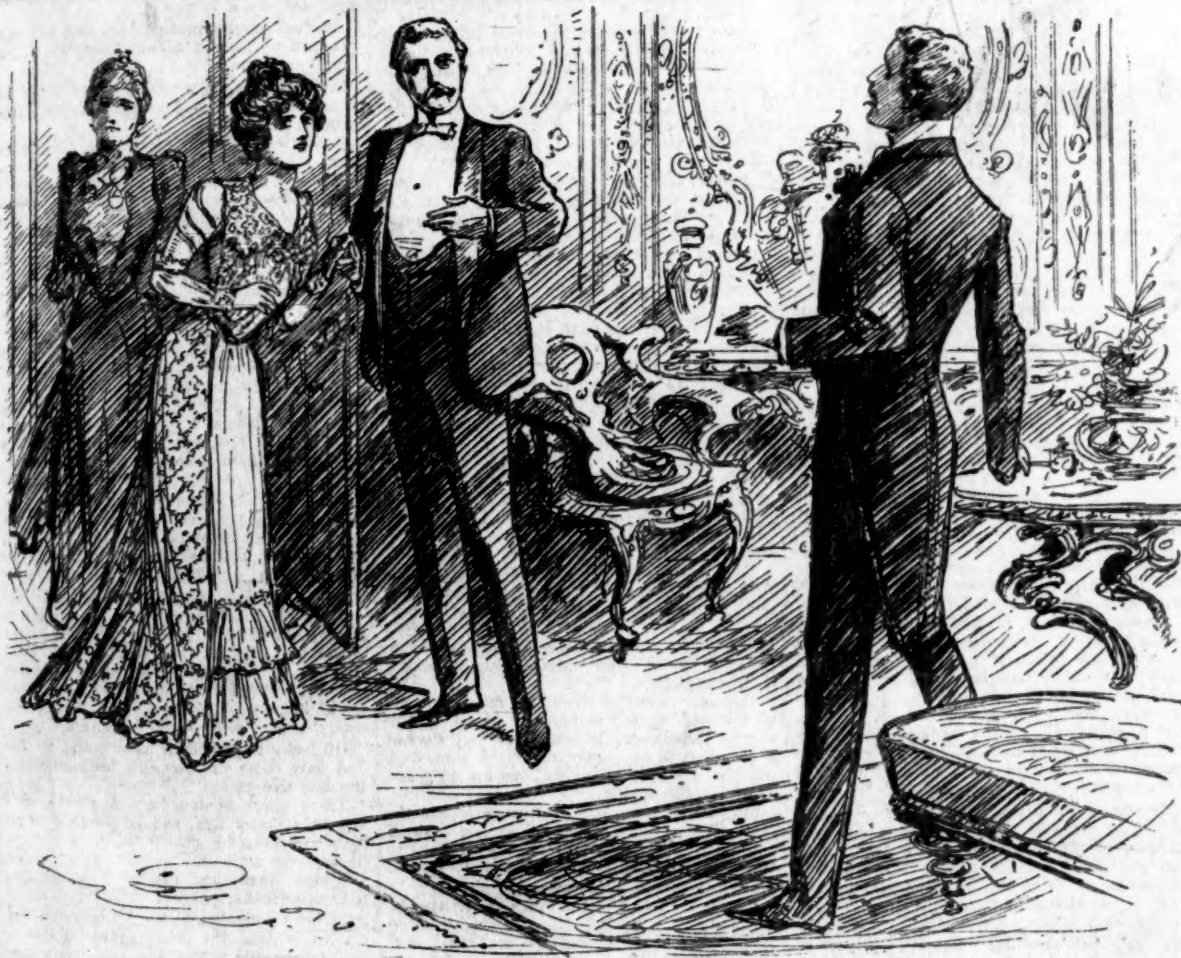
of Literature, Science, Art, and General Information.

[ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.]

No. 2075.—VOL. LXXX.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING FEBRUARY 7, 1903.

[PRICE ONE PENNY.]



“MY QUAKER RIVAL, BY JOVE,” THOUGHT VAL.

HIS QUAKER BRIDE

NOVELETTE

(COMPLETE IN THIS NUMBER.)

CHAPTER I.

VALentine CURZON, had gone out on no more important business than the choice of a bouquet, intended for a certain pretty, dark-eyed actress, with whom he had fallen harmlessly in love from the boxes. He was in love about once a month, on an average, with some fresh enchantress, seeming neither the better nor the worse for his many amours—the result of being idle, impressionable, young, and wealthy all at once.

Meanwhile, his luxuriously-furnished rooms in Bond Street were being taken by storm.

During his brief absence, curious, disapproving, astonished feminine eyes were scanning his domain—feminine minds were trying to arrive at some idea as to what the owner of such rooms could possibly be like.

“Verily, Ruth, if thy cousin’s apartment truthfully reflects his character and tastes, we might have spared ourselves the trouble of calling upon him. I fear that we shall have but little in common beyond our relationship. My sister’s son is evidently a man of the world.”

The speaker was an old lady, looking in her severely simple Quaker attire not unlike a pure, flawless, delicate piece of Dresden china.

She was small and slight, with snow-white hair, regular features, bright, pale, clear blue eyes, and a complexion that still retained its healthy, youthful bloom, thanks to frugal living and early hours.

Her dress displayed that blending of simplicity and quiet richness which always distinguishes a Quakeress of the old school.

Rachel Hargrave’s grey silk might have stood alone, its texture was so thick and costly. Her white cashmere shawl was of the finest ever woven, her large white straw bonnet, unadorned save for a piece of watered ribbon, that cost more than anyone would imagine, being of the best make and quality.

Her companion was a girl of eighteen, dressed in modified Quaker attire. Grey formed the key-note of her dress, as it were, yet it was tastefully draped, and trimmed with just a suspicion or dim tint of pale blue about it.

The girl herself was tall and slender, with large, limpid, long-lashed grey eyes, a pure, pale complexion, and quantities of pale, soft, golden hair, neatly plaited beneath her small close-fitting bonnet.

Ruth Inglefield was the personification of beautiful, passionless, unawakened girlhood—serene, flower-like, unconscious of her own loveliness, or of the power it must needs give her, sooner or later, over the hearts of men.

She glanced round this unknown cousin's sitting-room with all her aunt's curiosity, but without her condemning spirit.

In London for the first time, fresh from an out-of-the-way picturesque Cornish village, all that she saw and heard had for her the charm of novelty.

Ruth felt inclined to bless those May Meetings at Exeter Hall which had induced her aunt to come to them after an absence of more than twenty years.

"Perhaps, Aunt Rachael, Cousin Valentine may have been called out in a hurry, and he had not time to put his room in order before he went? What a quantity of pipes and riding-whips he seems to possess!"

"It is not so much the disorder I object to," said Aunt Rachael, severely, "although that is unseemly enough. It is the character of my nephew's surroundings; they savour too much of frivolity and worldliness, Ruth."

"The servant said he would not be long away," urged the girl, timidly, fearful lest her aunt should decide to beat an immediate retreat. "He may prove more satisfactory than—than his belongings!"

"That is true. We should judge no one hastily, Ruth. Sit down and wait awhile. He may return soon, and I should be sorry to miss seeing dear Miriam's boy. Go away, dog! go away! Ruth, child, didst ever see a creature so repulsive?"

The glorious May sunlight was streaming full into the large, handsome room, revealing the chaos composed of a young man's heterogeneous belongings.

A velvet smoking-cap and a well-coloured meerschaum lay upon the table, together with letters, circulars, half-a-dozen pairs of gloves, impatiently discarded because in want of mending, and a questionable novel. A confusion of glasses and decanters, pipes and cigars, adorned the sideboard. There were photo frames on the mantelpiece, containing the likenesses of various pretty notresses, with each and all of whom Val Curzon had, at some time, been in love.

His sporting tendencies evinced themselves in a variety of ways, sporting prints being upon the walls, together with portraits of Archer and Fordham. Sporting papers lay scattered about in every direction. A perfectly ugly bull-dog had aroused Aunt Rachael's fears by sniffing at her, while a white smooth-haired terrier and her three pups occupied a basket near the fireplace.

It was essentially a man's room, although the piano, some lovely Sèvres vases filled with flowers, choice statuettes, and a few warm, luscious, glowing landscapes in oils indicated redeeming qualities and higher tastes on the part of the absent and erring Val.

"The dog is not savage, Aunt," said Ruth, fearlessly patting "Jem's" ugly head, upon which "Miggs"—anxious to call attention to the charms of her family—immediately scrambled out of her basket, and joined in the friendly overtures.

"A French novel!" exclaimed Aunt Rachael, cautiously turning over one of Val's books as if she more than half expected it to burn her fingers. "That a nephew of mine should read such things, and—yes, actually, a pack of cards on the sideboard! Ruth, I regret having brought thee here. I will leave a note for thy cousin Valentine, and we will stay no longer. If he has a desire to see us, he can call at our lodging."

"But, Aunt Rachael—"

"Nay, child, I will listen to no remonstrances. This is no place for either you or me. Were your cousin to come in he might give us both but a cold welcome, since we belong, as it were, to different spheres."

Ruth looked disappointed. She had wished to meet Val Curzon, why, she hardly knew,

unless it was that her quiet, uneventful life rendered any fresh incident welcome.

His pipes and novels and other shortcomings had served rather to increase her interest in him than to diminish it. They were very dreadful, of course. They filled her with a kind of awe.

None the less, Ruth was conscious of a strong desire to become acquainted with the owner of these vanities.

Aunt Rachael produced a tract from her reticule, and wrote a stiff little note on the blank half-page at the back.

Placing the tract on the table where it could not fail to attract notice, she turned to go, followed by Ruth, Jim and Miggs accompanying them to the door, as if anxious to do the honours in canine fashion during their master's absence.

"Do you know any of those ladies whose likenesses were on the mantelpiece in Valentine's room, aunt?" asked Ruth, gravely, as they went along.

"Certainly not," said Aunt Rachael, drily. "I should advise thee to dismiss thy cousin from thy mind altogether, Ruth. We are not likely to see or hear any more of him."

The demure, rigid Quakeress was feeling hurt and disappointed. Miriam Brace had been her favourite sister, many years younger than herself, and Miriam had married John Curzon, a wealthy merchant, who did not belong to the Society of Friends, thus separating herself, to a great extent, from her family.

Soon after giving birth to twin sons Miriam had died. Then her husband became bankrupt, one loss following another in quick succession. His combined misfortunes proved too much for the unhappy man. He followed his wife to the grave in less than a year, leaving his boys totally unprovided for.

A Curzon who had settled at New York took one, and promised to provide for him as he grew older. The other, Val, had remained with Rachel Hargrave till he was received into the Blue Coat School. From that time he had been lost to her.

His godfather, a wealthy stockbroker, had taken Val to France, paid his college expenses, and granted him a liberal allowance. Then, just as he was thinking of walking the hospitals, prior to becoming a doctor, Val's godfather had died, leaving him the sum of twenty thousand pounds.

This had unsettled the young man. Instead of devoting himself assiduously to the profession he had chosen, he went in for any amount of pleasure, intending to work hard some day, but just for the present to have his fling and enjoy life thoroughly.

Money sometimes is a greater curse than the want of it. Men like Val Curzon are best off without it, since they will never work hard to develop their faculties unless the sharp spur of want drives them to do so.

Having seen or heard nothing of her nephew for many years, Rachael Hargrave had come to town as much for the purpose of visiting him as of attending the May meetings. A sharp pang of regret had gone through her on beholding the frivolous, worldly nature of his everyday surroundings.

She had been so fond of him as a boy, she had wished to keep him with her, and bring him up as a friend. But for that worldly-wise, stockbroking godfather, of whom the little old Quakeress could but think bitterly, Val might have become a very different man.

Having selected his bouquet—a costly one, wrapped in lace-paper—Val Curzon went home to write the note that was to accompany it.

He was a good-looking, debonaire young fellow, with dark expressive grey eyes, and a drooping moustache. Far from being languid or blasé, his manner was terse and animated. Life for him was no even-cut plaything, but a glad reality, a constant source of thoughtless enjoyment, which he seemed to abuse or wish himself rid of. There was no affectation about Val Curzon. Clever, handsome, pleasure-

loving, addicted to looking more than he really felt when women were in question, he gave the world full credit for all the enjoyment it afforded him, and openly avowed his profound satisfaction with things in general when any metaphysical or æsthetic grumbler threw cold water over his creed, and sneered at him for not joining the great army of malcontents.

Whistling an air from the "Mikado," Val entered his sunny sitting-room. The dogs welcomed him noisily, but he failed to understand the meaning they wished to convey.

"Down, Miggs! down, Jim! Confound those puppies, they've gnawed one of my riding gloves to pulp! Why don't you teach your family to behave better, old lady? Now for Lottie Moxelle's note. I wonder—Why, what the deuce is this?"

He had caught sight of Aunt Rachael's tract propped up against a china basin full of fragrant narcissus.

Taking it up, he turned it over and read the pencilled lines, traced in Aunt Rachael's delicate Italian hand:—

"Nephew Valentine,—I had thought to have the pleasure of seeing thee once more, after so long a parting. For this purpose I came here this morning with thy second cousin, Ruth Inglefield, who is in town with me, that she may profit by the May Meetings held at Exeter Hall. Thou wast from home, however, and—if a man may be judged by his surroundings—had it been otherwise, the visit might only have given rise to mutual regret and embarrassment. Should you experience a desire to meet thy relatives, Ruth and I are staying with Martha Browning in Verney Street, Bloomsbury, and we shall remain there until the end of May. If you have no wish to recognise the old ties, be sincere enough to stay away. You will receive no blame from your affectionate aunt,

"Martha Hargrave."

An annoyed expression flitted across the young man's face as he carefully folded the tract and looked round the room swiftly and ruefully. It had been mute evidence against him. Who would have thought of those women coming up to town so unexpectedly!

Aunt Martha had been very kind to him as a boy, and he knew that he had neglected her shamefully of late. It annoyed him to think that she had a pre-conceived prejudice against him, all through that confounded room, which he might have toned down a little had he been aware of the visit in store for him.

Of Ruth Inglefield he knew nothing. She had only come to live with her aunt within the last five years.

Then the ridiculous aspect of the affair suddenly struck him, and Val laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks as, in imagination, he saw the aunt and niece surveying his untidy apartment, and passing judgment upon it from a Quaker point of view.

"I must call upon them this afternoon, and try to remove the unfavourable impression already created," was the next impression. "Poor, kind, good Aunt Rachael, who wanted to bring me up in her own persuasion and make a broadbrim of me. What must she have thought of my diggings here! Jim, you villain, I hope you didn't show your teeth at the ladies. If you could only tell me what they said!"

"Are you out or at home, Curzon?" drawled a languid voice, as a small, fair-haired, faultlessly-dressed little man, with eyelids three sizes too large for him, entered the room, pausing for an instant upon the threshold.

"At home, my dear boy! Come in and shut the door! Have you been here before this morning?"

"Do I ever inflict myself upon society at unearthly hours? What a question! It implies the recent presence of other visitors. Were they dunces or beggars?"

"Neither, ladies," said Algy Cavendish, as he shook his head cunningly.

as he dropped into an easy chair and helped himself to a cigar.

"Worse and worse," he remarked, sorrowfully. "Curzon, some day, unless you mend your ways, mon ami, you'll find yourself up to the neck in breach of promise cases."

"Stuff! The ladies in this case were my aunt and cousin. Of course, they were bound to arrive when I was out, and—and," with a comprehensive sweep of the arm, "they drew their own conclusions, you know. They belong to the Society of Friends, and I'm afraid their opinion of me, according to this note, is a poor one."

Alvy took the tract as if it were some rare curiosity, and gravely read Aunt Rachael's note aloud.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Call on them this afternoon, and invite them to have tea with me in bachelor style to-morrow. Nothing like taking the bull by the horns, old man. Will you come and help keep me in countenance?"

"I'll do what I can to spare your blushes, and prevent you from feeling overwhelmed. Are—both your relatives elderly, Curzon?"

"One is; the other I have never seen."

"Indeed! I would advise a little judicious weeding of your household stuff before the guests arrive. Plainly speaking, your rooms are not in good form, Curzon. They contain a wild conglomeration of everything—you might be horsey, artistic, bookish, or theatrical. You have surrounded yourself with the outward tokens of each. Such myriad-mindedness is apt to mystify strangers."

"Wait till to-morrow," said Val, triumphantly, "and I'll show you a transformation scene that shall do credit to my 'myriad-mindedness,' Algy."

CHAPTER II.

"I should not have known you again, nephew Valentine, you are so altered, and you have grown so tall," said Aunt Rachael, subjecting the young man to a calm, searching scrutiny as he sat opposite to her in Martha Browning's drawing-room that afternoon. "It is quite astonishing to me how tall you have grown. Your father was under the middle height."

She dropped the "thee" and "thou" when speaking to those who were not of her own persuasion. Val laughed, and coloured furiously. A man of five-and-twenty does not care to be told how much he has "grown," especially when a pretty girl is present.

"As if I were a great, awkward, hobble-de-hoy of eighteen," he reflected, indignantly. Then aloud,—

"You know the old proverb, Aunt Rachael: 'Ill weeds grow apace.'"

"I hope that you are not an ill weed," said Aunt Rachael, seriously. "It is no jesting matter, nephew. Pleased as I am to see you again, and to find that you have still a little affection left for me, I must confess that I am far from satisfied with you in many respects. I was always a plain-spoken woman, as you know. Why are you frittering away your time in every sort of youthful folly, when you ought to be acquiring a knowledge of medicine, since you have chosen the healing art as your profession?"

Val waxed pathetic.

"I have not wasted much time yet," he replied, in self-defence. "I want to see a little of the world before settling down to hard work as a doctor; it is only natural. A knowledge of the world, you know, is indispensable to a medical man."

"Verily, nephew Valentine, am I to understand that you will set bones and cure diseases so much the more skillfully by reason of your acquaintance with cards, French novels, and horseracing?" said Aunt Rachael, pitilessly. "Methinks they are strange and unworthy means by which to attain your end."

"I am not such a feather-brained fellow as you imagine," replied Val, with unblushing

effrontery. "Lots of those things you saw in my room when you called belong to a friend of mine who has been staying with me lately. My own tastes are of the quietest description possible. I can assure you of this if you and Cousin Ruth will accept a bachelor's invitation, and take tea with me to-morrow. If you refuse, Aunt Rachael, I shall think that you have formed a bad opinion of the nephew you were so kind to as a boy."

Rachael Hargrave hesitated. Should she accept the invitation, or not? Her heart yearned over Miriam's boy, in spite of his manifest shortcomings.

Then she decided to go. Supposing him to be somewhat wild and frivolous, the more need of serious conversation and well-meant interference.

She would give him as much of her society as possible while she remained in town.

"Since you wish it, Valentine, we will come," she said, in a less severe tone; "but pray go to no unnecessary expense on our account. Ruth and I never indulge in luxuries."

"Ruth must be anxious to see more of London," remarked Val, turning towards the silent girl, in the hope of inducing her to join in the conversation.

She sat there listening intently, but saying scarce anything. Yet her silence did not strike him as being the result of stupidity or dullness.

It was an intelligent shyness, that time and tact would speedily change into eager, animated intercourse.

"We have not come to London for the purpose of seeing sights, nephew," corrected Aunt Rachael. "When the May Meetings are over we shall return to our home."

"But you really must let me take you about a little, you know," pleaded Val, rendered eloquent by the disappointment in Ruth's soft grey eyes. "There are the parks and the public buildings. Ruth would like to see these, I'm sure. Oh, yes, and the Exhibition—a very quiet sort of thing that, Aunt Rachael. You may meet clergymen there by the score."

"Nevertheless, I do not think I shall go. I am too old to go about much myself, and Ruth has been brought up to care but little for such things. It is not often that we shall require an escort, Valentine—unless you would like to go with us occasionally to Exeter Hall."

"I'll think about it; but I won't promise," said Val, hastily. "Are you staying here with friends, Aunt Rachael?"

"No. Martha Browning is an old servant of mine. She took this house when she got married to a butler, and they let apartments. Fortunately, her drawing-room apartments chanced to be empty when we came to town, and she was delighted to have us with her again."

"I see. It is rather a dull street."

"It is quiet, and on that account it suits me very well. When did you last hear from your brother in America, Valentine?"

Val's face clouded suddenly.

"You have not heard, then?" he said, regretfully. "Of course, how should you? Poor Fred turned out rather wild, it appears. Gave his uncle no end of trouble, and left New York three years ago with debts enough to swamp him. He went to Mexico, it is believed, where he was scalped by those Indian brutes while making his way up the country with several other white men. Poor old Fred! We knew next to nothing of each other, through being parted so early in life, yet the news gave me a terrible shock at the time. It was such a miserable ending for him!"

"Miserable indeed!" said Aunt Rachael; sadly. "I hope it will be a lesson to you, Valentine, not to follow in his footsteps!"

"So far as Mexico and the Indians go I certainly shan't," said Val, gravely. "I can only remember Fred as a gallant little chap in pin-faces. Since his death I have often wished that we had exchanged photos."

"I have a small water-colour likeness of you both upstairs, taken when you were about three

years old. I brought it to town with me, because it wants a little skilful retouching by a portrait painter. I will fetch it for you to see. At that age it was difficult to distinguish you from your brother Frederick!"

As Rachael Hargrave left the room to fetch the treasured portrait, Val turned towards Ruth with a sudden accession of interest.

A girl who seemed unconscious of her own beauty, who did nothing to challenge masculine admiration, was, to say the least of it, deserving of notice as a fresh experience, and Val was fond of a new sensation.

Yet he could not for the life of him address Ruth in the easy caressing tone of incipient flirtation that he was sure to fall into with other lovely women to whom he did graceful homage.

She was not proud or stately, yet her pure, passionless, unconscious beauty seemed to call for something bordering closely upon reverence. Persiflage would have seemed flippant and out of place as addressed to her.

Val Curzon felt this dimly, and he treated her with a kind of gentle deference. She reminded him of spring flowers, with their chastened delicate loveliness, of Sabbath bells, of all things pure and good and holy.

Lottie Roselle and her vivacious sisterhood faded from his mind as he bent over the young Quakeress, till his mountaineer nearly brushed the pale gold of her hair.

"Ruth—Cousin Ruth! I may call you that, may I not?"

"I suppose so," she replied, simply, with a little increase of colour to her clear face. "As you say, we are cousins!"

"And on that account we ought to be good friends. Are you quite as indifferent to all the sights of London as Aunt Rachael would have me believe?"

A longing look danced in the girl's starry eyes.

"Oh, no! That is, Aunt Rachael does not wish me to care for such things," she said, hurriedly. "But I should very much like to see more of London before we go back to Penryn. It is very, very dull down there! I have been looking forward to this visit for months, and now it has come it seems so disappointing. We never go out, except to a meeting. I ought not to complain, but—but it is so tantalising to be in London and to go nowhere. I should like to see the Tower, and Westminster Abbey—and to walk over Tower Bridge!"

Val stifled a smile in its birth. Ruth's longings were of such a modest, simple nature, poor child, as compared with those of many other young people in town for the first time.

"I think we ought to be able to compass that," he said, gently. "Aunt Rachael must intrust you to me now and then. Ruth, and give me leave to take you about. I shall insist upon it. Meetings are all very well; but at your age! Cousins are almost the same as brothers and sisters, you know, so she can't possibly object to me as an escort. You shall go to Westminster Abbey, and see Poets' Corner, where all the great ones are buried; and then pictures—are you fond of pictures?"

"Yes, very; but I have seen so few, and I have hardly read any books, save religious ones. Aunt Rachael does not approve of poetry or fiction. I am afraid you will find me sadly ignorant of all that other girls know!"

"What a world of beauty you will have to inherit later on!" said Val, musingly. "All that is stale to others will be fresh to you. Do you mean to say that you have read no poetry, Ruth?"

"Only Milton and Dr. Watts."

"Do you play?"

"Yes, I begged Aunt Rachael to let me have this one accomplishment. I am very fond of music!"

"You must play to me to-morrow, and I shall send you some books. Aunt Rachael must not be allowed to keep all the sunshine

out of your life in this way. She is good, but frightfully narrow in all her opinions, Ruth."

"Don't say that, or I shall think I have been blaming her unjustly," pleaded the girl. "I—I am very happy as a rule, only I should like to read more, and not to be confined within such a narrow circle of duties and interests. It makes me envy other girls, and that is wrong."

Aunt Rachael's entrance with the little, faded water-colour portrait of the twin-brothers put a stop to the conversation.

After examining the portrait, which for Val possessed little interest, he took leave of his relatives, and went home to dress for dinner.

He had an invitation to dine with the Smedlar-Brounes, great people in the æsthetic line. Miss Smedlar-Broune found Val Curzon unusually distrustful and inattentive that night. Her quite too utterly-utter conversation, her vague yearnings towards the beautiful and the infinite, met with no satisfactory response from the good-looking young fellow who was wont to be amused by them.

His thoughts had wandered from the towzled-headed, angular, brick-dust complexioned girl beside him, dressed in a kind of limp, old-fashioned bed-gown, to a pale, lovely face framed in golden hair—a face with a kind of angelic peace and purity resting upon it.

Miss Smedlar-Broune's want of beauty, her shallow meretricious art-talk, only served to increase the admiration, the sense of having found a treasure, that Ruth had awakened within Val Curzon's breast.

He rose early on the following morning, much to the astonishment of his landlady, and went to work with a will to make his sitting-room a model of order and good taste ere Aunt Rachael saw it again.

He knew, artful fellow, that unless he succeeded in winning her good opinion he should see but little of Ruth; and he wanted to study Ruth, to draw her out, feeling quite sure that the result would more than repay him for his trouble.

Archer and Fordham were taken down and stowed away in the recesses of a dark cupboard. The sideboard was cleared of all save an innocent-looking Etruscan water-jar and a couple of glasses.

Val made a clean sweep of the novels and sporting papers, cramming them into a large convenient ottoman. Jim, Miggs, and the puppies were relegated to the back-yard, where they howled musically. Even the photos on the mantelpiece were carefully weeded, Val going about his task with a queer little smile that betokened much inward amusement.

He ordered cakes and fruit, tea, coffee, and cream; he bought a wealth of fresh flowers, and arranged them about the room in rich masses of scented bloom. Then he sat down and whistled softly as he surveyed his handiwork.

"Upon my word, it is a change for the better!" he remarked aloud. "I wonder if she will be pleased with it?"

And the personal pronoun had no reference to Aunt Rachael.

Val's guests were somewhat late in arriving. He was on the verge of imitating Mrs. Gamp under similar circumstances by exclaiming impatiently, "Drat it, why don't they come?" when Algy Cavendish put in an appearance.

"Quite Arcadian," he remarked, glancing round the room with languid approval before sinking into an easy chair. "You might be a curate, Curzon, expecting a visit from your bishop. You've done the thing thoroughly for a Philistine. And the Quaker relations? Did you see them yesterday? Are they actually coming?"

"Yes. You'll be discreet, Algy? It's like treading on egg-shells to talk with Aunt Rachael. I'm sometimes at a loss for a subject that won't bring down reproof on my head. Don't, for pity's sake, air your High Church proclivities in her hearing."

"You may trust me, mon cher. In these delicate matters I seldom blunder. I intend to cut you out in your aunt's estimation. I am here for that purpose. You have not alluded to the cousin!"

"I think she will satisfy even your fastidious taste. She is not over forty, or absolutely ugly. Look here Algy," sitting bolt upright, "you are not to fall in love with Ruth!"

"You wish to reserve that privilege. Very well. I won't enter the lists against you at present. Disinterested friendship is not altogether a thing of the past!"

"Rubbish! If Amelia FitzMarkham were not engrossing your attention I would put not the least faith in your promise."

"And this is gratitude?" murmured Algy, with a sigh, his full, heavy eyelids giving him the appearance of being always half asleep.

Sometimes in society people underrated the mental abilities of the little, sleepy-looking, fair-haired man, and ventured upon some quietly insolent or unduly familiar remark.

On these occasions Algy would appear to doze—the reply was so long in coming. But when it did come his interlocutor was, as a rule, sorry he spoke.

The scabbard might be unpromising, but the blade it contained was bright as polished steel.

Algy Cavendish was a representative man, belonging to a purely modern and fast-increasing type. Fond of society, genial, faultlessly dressed, to be met everywhere, an authority upon all social questions—from the cut of a dress-coat to the exact colour of a professional beauty's eyebrows.

He was also a decent, hard-working High Churchman, useful in his lay capacity as altar-server and sidesman at a large popular West End church.

Algy did not attempt to shelve his creed. With him it was an important and prominent feature, of which he was in no wise ashamed.

How he managed to combine devotion with fashion, without either seeming inconsistent, Val Curzon could not see, yet so it was. Both seemed genuine in their way.

"The ladies, Val!" said Algy, as footsteps were heard ascending the stairs. "Now if you have deceived me—"

Both men rose as the servant opened the door, ushering Aunt Rachel and her niece for the second time into the large, sun-lit, flower-scented room.

CHAPTER III.

Val Curzon's afternoon tea was a decided success. Aunt Rachael was in a less condemning mood, more inclined to think favourably of her nephew than on the previous day.

Beyond a few mild reproofs with regard to extravagance and luxury, she refrained from censuring any of Val's arrangements.

Perhaps Algy Cavendish's unexpected presence served to shield his friend from more open criticism. Val had invited him with an eye to this, fearing lest the unrestrained nature of a family tea-party might prove too much for him. Algy prevented Aunt Rachael from presuming too much upon her relationship.

The little man could talk well upon almost every subject under the sun. When by chance a dangerous topic hove in sight, and threatened to render Aunt Rachael severe and dogmatic, it was amusing to note how actively both men avoided it by turning up the nearest conversational opening to get out of its way.

Algy was like a chameleon. He could take more than one aspect, and he liked to display his powers. Before tea was over he had won golden opinions from Aunt Rachael as a sensible, modest, sober-minded young man, with nothing frivolous about him.

And Ruth! She was in a state of shy, silent rapture. Everything delighted her. The large, pleasant room, containing so many beautiful objects for the eye to rest upon, the newness of her surroundings, the busy life in the street below, were alike welcome to one used only to grey, unbroken dullness.

Ruth liked Valentine's friend. He was a very amiable, interesting young man, she thought, one whose manner seemed to set her at ease directly, but most of all she liked Val himself.

Handsome, debonnaire, with the easy graceful bearing imparted by extensive social intercourse and good breeding, Val was exactly the sort of man to take a young girl's heart by storm. And when that girl had seen only Quakers—good fellows, certainly, but sadly wanting in manly beauty and superficial polish, in *savoir vivre*—the danger that she would fall in love with him was great.

Algy's eyelids had gone up a little on beholding Ruth. Her rare delicate beauty, emphasized by the graceful simplicity of her dress, had taken him by surprise.

"She would make a lovely Madonna," he mentally decided. "These fair, innocent faces are almost perfect in repose. And the old lady wants putting under a glass case. She is too severe, too perfect, in her prim, dainty, charming old way for this workaday world. Will Val fall in love with his cousin? If he doesn't he ought to be ashamed of himself. But for Aurelia I would fall in love with her myself."

"You have proved very hospitable, Valentine," said Aunt Rachael, in her precise, even tones. "Country cousins are not always so well received by their friends in town."

"I'm delighted to have you here," said Val, looking at Ruth as he spoke. "I want to take you to Earl's Court Exhibition to-morrow. At what time will you be ready?"

This was a bold stroke, but it failed to ensure success.

"I shall not be able to go anywhere to-morrow," Aunt Rachael replied, decisively.

"I expect a friend to arrive from Cornwall, and of course Ruth cannot go without me. Perhaps before we leave London we shall avail ourselves of your kind offer, nephew, but, as I told you before, we did not come with the idea of indulging in any worldly pleasure."

Val was conscious of an undutiful longing to take his aged relative by the shoulders and shake her. How obstinate and unyielding she was! It was some comfort to see his own disappointment mirrored in Ruth's grey eyes.

"I am sure Ruth would like to see the Exhibition," he persisted; "and you can't always be going to a meeting, Aunt Rachael."

"Ruth cares but little for sights and pleasures, I am glad to say. She can wait until I am able to accompany her, Valentines."

Algy interposed by asking for some music. Without any pretty excuses, Ruth rose at once and went to the piano.

She played Mendelssohn's "Song without Words," at his request, in truthful, sympathetic style, Val standing beside her to turn over the music, while Algy good-naturedly devoted himself to Aunt Rachel.

"I am awfully sorry that I can't get permission to take you anywhere yet," murmured Val, as she ceased playing. "Aunt Rachael is more unbending than ever. I shall console myself, though, by giving you a daily call, unless you think you will get tired of seeing me so often, Ruth!"

She smiled up at him through some unshed tears.

The disappointment to her had been more bitter than he could realise, because her pleasures were so few.

His promise of calling daily had taken half the sting away, however.

"I shall be glad to see you," she said, frankly. "Yes, I do feel disappointed at not going anywhere. At the same time, it is only a little thing, and I have always had to resign my will at the bidding of another. I am used to it."

How brave and patient she was, how submissive under circumstances that would have induced the majority of girls to rebel! Val's admiration and interest were steadily rising.

"I shall certainly come to Verney Street to-morrow," he said, as she rose from the piano,

"and I will bring the books I promised to lend you with me."

"What have you done with the dogs?" she inquired, brightly; "I am so fond of dogs. I was getting quite intimate with yours yesterday. Have you banished them on our account?"

"Yes, but they shall come up if you are not afraid of them. I expect they've howled themselves pretty nearly hoarse by this time in the yard."

Jem, Miggs, and the puppies were accordingly summoned. They appeared in a state of intense excitement and delight, not unmingled with indignation, at having been kept in durance vile so long.

Ruth knelt down and fed them with biscuits, Val watching her admiringly the while. Miggs placed her puppies one by one in the girl's lap, thumping her scrap of a tail against the floor, and glancing up with eyes full of maternal pride as Ruth fondled and caressed them.

"The vain old thing! She wants you to admire her progeny," said Val, laughingly. "It is a weakness that canine and human mothers share in common."

"And a very pardonable one," said Ruth, defending her sex, like a true woman, against masculine aspersions.

"Well, what do you think of my relations?" Val inquired when they had gone.

"The girl is charming, positively charming!" said Algy, effusively. "Fresh, simple, unaffected, yet with plenty of sense and intellect. I am rather afraid of the old lady. It is a pity that such a girl should be left entirely in her hands. She will spoil her in the shaping process."

"Just my opinion, yet I don't know how to prevent it. Poor little Ruth! I should like to rescue her from such well-meant tyranny before it has succeeded in darkening her life. If I could only give her a passing gleam of pleasure I should be glad."

"Where there's a will there's a way. You've got the will, now it remains to find the way. By-the-by, are you going to Lady Vernon's ball to-night?"

"Yes, I've got an invite. Are you going?"

"I am."

"Then, needless to say, the fair Aurelia will be there. Is she as cruel as ever, Algy?"

"There isn't much spare sentiment about her. I can't say she treats me worse than she does other men, though. It is one of the articles of her creed to profess hatred towards all men, you know."

"Of course; she belongs to the strong-minded sisterhood. That in itself would be sufficient to make me hate her. In my opinion, a female servant is the most objectionable creature under the sun."

"But Aurelia is an exceptional instance! Her learning only serves to render her delightfully piquant. She might be the offspring of a marriage between the Latin Grammar and Miss Braddon's latest novel."

"Well, I don't want to disparage your lady love, old man! If she satisfies you, that is all sufficient! Have you ventured to propose to her yet?"

"Propose! not I. That would be to lose her confidence, to render myself ridiculous in her eyes at once. No. I wait my time. Aurelia is not an ordinary girl, to be wooed in the ordinary way. I must overcome her dislike to men, or, rather, I should say, to one man in particular, before I ask her to become my wife. Otherwise, the result would be failure, complete and absolute."

"How are you going to storm the castle of this Princess Ida?"

"I'm going to make use of her father, the Colonel. When my plan is thoroughly matured I'll unfold it for your admiring inspection."

Val Curzon and Algy Cavendish met again later on in Lady Vernon's spacious rooms, scintillating with lights and mirrors, fragrant with flowers, resounding with music, low, soft, languorous music stealing in upon the senses

like a dream, full of vague, mingled pleasure and pain.

Val, who had evidently got Ruth upon the brain, was in no hurry to provide himself with a partner.

Algy, on the other hand, caught sight of his divinity, hurried across to her, and wrote his name on her tablets for several dances.

"You have taken more than your fair share," said Aurelia FitzMarkham, calmly. "Selfishness and greed! Men monopolise those amiable qualities to such an extent I'm sure I wonder that any remain over—that a selfish or greedy woman should exist."

Miss FitzMarkham was a tall, self-possessed girl of nineteen, with short wavy brown hair, pretty short-sighted brown eyes, regular features, a piquant nose, and a firm little mouth. As a rule she wore glasses, that added to the attractive piquancy of her appearance, imparting a learned erudite air to the rounded, youthful loveliness.

Aurelia was a Girtton girl. She had passed countless examinations, once even high honours. Grave college dons had bestowed well-merited praise upon her, many an undergraduate would have been glad to possess her knowledge of Greek and mathematics, Aurelia's strong points.

Blended with Aurelia's learning was a strong desire to assist in the emancipation of her sex from masculine thralldom. She wished to throw open all trades and professions to women, to gain electoral privileges for them. It would be hard to say what Aurelia, in her grateful enthusiasm, did not hope to achieve. She threw herself heart and soul into the struggle for supremacy; platform speeches came easy to her, the higher education of women was her favourite theme.

As a rule, young men fought shy of Aurelia FitzMarkham. They were afraid of her learning, and her caustic speeches. She treated them in such a cavalier manner that their amour propre was soon offended.

Algy Cavendish, however, had contrived to fall desperately in love with the pretty, clever, man-hating girl. He was far too shrewd to ruin his chance of winning her by a premature proposal. He contented himself for the present with sturdily standing his ground, and showing that he was not in the least afraid of her. His wit was as keen as hers, and in return for snubs and sarcastic speeches Algy generally contrived to give his lady-love "as good as she sent."

Aurelia recognised this, and in her heart respected the little man for being so plucky. No other line of action would have succeeded with her. Nevertheless, she was not going to allow her respect to appear upon the surface.

"I don't approve of indiscriminate acts of self-sacrifice," said Algy, lazily. "How do I know, if I were to resign one of my dances with you, that the man I gave it up to wouldn't laugh at me for being such an idiot? I don't mean to give it up. I can't possibly stand lower in your opinion than I do at present, Miss FitzMarkham."

"He hasn't even an atom of self-respect left," said Aurelia, witheringly. "Well, I suppose you must have the dances against which you have scrawled your name—that is, if I stay long enough."

"Why should you leave early?"

"I want to get papa away from that hateful woman, Mrs. Whycherley. He has been talking to her for the last half-hour. If I am not careful she will marry him before the season is over. Papa is a sad trouble to me. Look at them! Would you imagine that, at their age, people could be such idiots?"

Algy glanced across to the velvet lounge upon which Colonel FitzMarkham and his companion were seated.

The Colonel, a tall, fresh-coloured man of sixty, with long grey whiskers—the true Piccadilly "weeper"—and a naturally boyish, mercurial air, was talking earnestly to Mrs. Whycherley, a well-preserved, handsome middle-aged widow.

"But if you could once get him satisfactorily married he would be off your hands!" said Algy, gravely, aware of the Colonel's weakness for matrimony and the trouble it entailed upon his daughter, of whom the old warrior stood in no little awe.

"Of course; but he never falls in love, as he calls it, with the right person," said Aurelia, flashing an angry glance in the direction of the culprits. "Last year it was actually a person serving in the shop. I only found it out just in time to carry him off to Nice by sheer force. The year before it was a young governess; now it is Mrs. Whycherley, of whom we know little or nothing. I'm quite sure she would make him miserable if I let him marry her, and I want to save him from such a fate, richly as he deserves it. Ever since I was fourteen I have been engaged in looking after papa, and saving him from the unsuitable marriage he is bent upon making. Our relative positions are completely reversed."

"Shall I try to find out what I can with regard to Mrs. Whycherley's antecedents?" asked Algy, compassionately. "Then you would have something definite to go upon."

"Thanks! If you only would I should be for ever grateful. You can't wonder that I despise men when papa makes such a goose of himself, and wants so much keeping in order."

Algy and Aurelia danced together several times, while the Colonel and Mrs. Whycherley chatted amiably.

Unable to bear it any longer, Aurelia swept up to them.

"Papa, I am ready to go home!" she said, imperiously.

"But, my dear, it's so early, and—"

"My head aches, and I can't stay any longer. I'm sure Mrs. Whycherley must be quite tired of talking to you and playing wall-flower. She will be glad to get rid of us."

The reluctant Colonel rose, and Aurelia led him away, after exchanging a defiant, combative glance with her fair antagonist, the widow.

CHAPTER IV.

MAY had glided gently, pleasantly, brightly into June, the month of roses. Sunny skies and balmy air rendered even London endurable.

Aunt Rachael and Ruth Inglesfield were still in town. A slight illness had prevented them from returning to Penwyr until the patient, Aunt Rachael, should be strong enough to bear the journey.

Val Curzon had kept his promise with regard to the daily call, becoming more and more enamoured of Ruth each time they met. Confidential intercourse between them was out of the question, since Aunt Rachael was always present when Val arrived with his offering of books or fruit and flowers. Yes, Ruth regarded these visits as the one bright redeeming feature in her otherwise sad constrained young life. Could Aunt Rachael have guessed how much they meant to her—how every word and look of Val's was treasured up in the girl's heart—she might have hastened her departure, and done her best to stamp out the charming passion.

Not even to herself did Ruth confess that she was in love with her cousin. Such a confession would, in her opinion, have implied a lack of modesty. No, in her vague, timid happiness she shrank from sounding the depths of her own heart.

Life had suddenly become rich, and full, and precious, gliding along with an undercurrent of deep, passionate feeling akin to pain in its dreamy intensity. What had caused this change, and how long it would last, she dared not ask herself.

Meanwhile, Aunt Rachael recovered, and spoke of going home in a few days. Home! the word sent a dreary thrill through Ruth. It meant the extinction of the soft, radiant, glowing light that was shining now upon her

life, and transforming the world into a region of delight. How could she ever go back to that chill, dry, arid existence after having for awhile gazed down upon such a dazzling vista of hope, and love, and happiness?

Home! That would mean saying goodbye to Val Curzon. The thought was too much for Ruth. She hid her face in her hands, and sobbed helplessly, desolately.

"Why, my dear little girl, what is the matter?"

The voice was Val's. He had stolen upon her unawares. Ruth sprang up with crimson cheeks, and strove to give him a tranquil, ordinary greeting.

"I—I was feeling rather dull," she murmured, confusedly. "How quietly you must have come in! I am not often so foolish, cousin Valentine. Only I am alone to-day. Aunt Rachael has gone to Brighton to see a friend there who is ill. She will not return till to-morrow morning. Meanwhile, I have all the packing to do. We leave town, you know, the day after to-morrow!"

"Yes, and you have seen nothing of it beyond Exeter Hall," said Val, indignantly. "Enough to set any girl crying. Run upstairs, and put your things on at once, like a good, sensible, little woman. I'm going to take you to the Exhibition; and your packing can stand over till to-morrow!"

"But what will Aunt Rachael say?" inquired the girl, half-fearful, half-delighted. "She will be so angry."

"Oh! I'll make things right with her. I'll say I carried you off by sheer force, in spite of Martha Browning's protest. Why, Ruth, you forget that we are cousins. Doesn't that give me a right to take you anywhere? Of course it does. Run away, and don't be long getting ready. We couldn't have a more glorious morning!"

His authoritative, masterful manner swept away Ruth's scruples like cobwebs. Surely Aunt Rachael could not be so very angry when Val explained the escapade to her in his airy, irresistible fashion!

She came down in less than ten minutes, looking very lovely in her grey dress and lace cape, a compact little white bonnet, trimmed with salmon-coloured velvet, crowning her golden braids, a big lace sunshade in her well-gloved hand.

"Bless you! I hope you'll enjoy yourself!" said Martha Browning, heartily. "You've had no enjoyment since here you've been. You'll take good care of Ruth, sir," turning rather uneasily to Val. "You see, Miss Hargrave left her with me, and—"

"Don't worry yourself, Mrs. Browning. I admit your responsibility; but I am quite capable of taking care of Miss Ruth," said Val, with a smile. "I'll return her to you safe and sound to-night, after the illumination. She must wait to see that, you know; and Miss Hargrave will forgive me for carrying her off when I tell the tale to-morrow. I'll say you did your very utmost to prevent it—that we left you the very image of rage and despair in the front hall. Now, Ruth."

He put her into a hansom, sprang in beside her, and they were soon bowling smoothly along in the direction of Earl's Court.

"Oh, Valentine! what have you done?" said Ruth, her eyes sparkling, the delicate colour mounting in her fair face. "I'm quite afraid to think of to-morrow."

"To-day has got to come first," said Val, philosophically.

He had planned the affair immediately on hearing Aunt Rachael express her intention of going to Brighton.

"I wish you would call me Val, Ruth. Life isn't long enough to get round Valentine so often."

"Will there be any music, Val, at the Exhibition?"

"Music! No end. You can listen to the band on the terraces, then you can stroll

round the grounds and then back again, and so on. It's a perpetual feast of music."

Val felt her arm flutter a little tremulously within his as they passed the grand equestrian statue in the entrance, and descended the wide, shallow steps leading into the exhibition building.

The grandeur and vastness of it all awed and astonished Ruth. As she became accustomed to the feeling her enjoyment increased.

The machinery did not interest her much, but the jewellery, the china and porcelain, the art furniture, the musical instruments, evoked many an expression of wondering delight!

Ruth was fond of all things lovely; and their absence, so far as her life at Penwyrr was concerned, had often filled her with stifled regret.

"Look, Val!" she said, rapturously, pointing to a superb dessert-service, the ice plates representing a large full-blown chrysanthemum, the spoons consisting of a pink bud with a long green stalk. "Are they not lovely? How I should like to be able to buy them! Although that is foolish," she continued, smiling at her own enthusiasm, "since I should have no place of my own to put them in, and we never give dinner-parties at Penwyrr."

"That would be a more suitable purchase," said Val, pointing to a small yachting piano, painted a delicate ivory-white, with a spray of apple-blossoms across the front, and a white satin music-stool to match. "I should like to see you seated at such an instrument, Ruth!"

Some idea of purchasing it for her flitted across his mind as they walked away to another part of the building. Ruth had to see the Russian, Japanese, and Chinese departments, the Aquarium, the grounds, and all in one short day! As Val impressed upon her, they had no time to lose.

Many a visitor to the Exhibition turned to look after Ruth Ingfield as she went along leaning on Val's arm, regardless of the notice her rare, delicate beauty excited.

Val felt proud of his companion, more than ever bent upon winning her love, and rescuing her from Aunt Rachael by making her his wife.

Ruth was intensely happy. The fact of being with Val Curzon heightened the enjoyment of her stolen holiday, and rendered it a thousand times more precious. Without him the Exhibition for her would have lost half its charm.

She had known so little happiness, poor child; she had had to husband that little so carefully that to have so much come at once seemed almost a wasteful luxury of bliss, a perfect rioting in delight.

"Shall we go into the grounds now?" asked Val, later on. "The band of the Scots Guards will be playing there directly."

"I haven't seen Old London!" replied the girl, gently. "I should so much like to see that first!"

"By Jove! no. I had forgotten Old London. It's by a long way the best part of the show. We can afford to spend just half-an-hour there, Ruth."

He watched her face as they went slowly through the picturesque, narrow street, with its admirable imitation of quaint, gabled houses on either side. The low-browed shops, each with its sign-board swinging over the door, the old-fashioned trades being carried on inside, the shop-people clothed in old English costumes, the air of antiquity that pervaded everything, increased her sense of wondering delight.

"We have drifted back to the middle ages," she said, softly, stopping to watch the skilful metal-workers. "How quiet, and peaceful, and old it all is! The rush and hurry of modern life seems shut out altogether. Oh, listen to the chimera!" as the giants on the church tower struck their bells, and "Poor Bessie was a Sailor's Bride" floated softly down in mellow, silvery notes. "Oh, Val! it

is perfect! I could stay in Old London all day."

"Prithee, then enter in, fair maid," said Val, laughingly, as they reached the sweet-shop, presided over by a very pretty girl. "Don't you see the announcement?—'We have this day made Old London rock.' It would be rank heresy to pass without buying some."

As if in a dream Ruth Ingfield suffered Val to lead her upstairs and down, through galleries filled with exquisite art-furniture and church work, till they stood in Dick Whittington's parlour.

There was a rose-stall in the low doorway; Val bought some roses, delicious creamy half-blown buds, and handed them to Ruth, with a tender, expressive look in his grey eyes.

"Gather ye roses while ye may," he murmured playfully, as he placed them in her hand.

She might have said that she had been gathering roses all day—the deep-scented, crimson-hearted, dewy roses of love's own planting.

It was a time of growth and expansion for Ruth. Ordinary moods and feelings no longer awayed her. The daring deed of which she had been guilty was forgotten. Completely carried away by the joy and excitement of the moment, she surrendered herself to the inrush of fresh experiences, and thoughts of to-morrow had ceased to trouble her.

Just outside Dick Whittington's parlour was a wooden bench placed against the wall, exactly opposite to the clock-tower. Ruth sat down on it to rest for a few minutes, not so much, because she felt tired as from a reluctance to leave Old London.

The afternoon refulgence, warm, golden, ethereal, the steady stream of well-dressed men and women passing up and down the quaint old street, the rich, heavy scent of roses coming from the stall round the corner, the melody of the chimes, sank deeply into her heart as she drank in the beauty of the never-to-be-forgotten scene.

"We really must go now, Ruth, or you will see nothing of the grounds," said Val, breaking in reluctantly upon her reverie.

With one last lingering look Ruth rose, and accompanied him from the enchanted spot.

"We can eat our ices and listen to the band playing in the kiosk at the same time," Val remarked, as they entered the grounds; "the refreshment pavilion is close to the terrace."

"Ices! I have never tasted them," said Ruth, simply. "I suppose they are delicious in hot weather?"

"She has never tasted an ice," repeated Val, gravely. "What sort of people are they who live at Penwyrr, Ruth?"

"Not the sort of people to indulge in ices," said Ruth, merrily. "Aunt Rachael would denounce them as luxurious and unwholesome."

"You shall pass your own opinion upon them," said Val, taking possession of a little marble-topped table very near to the band, and giving his order. "I'm quite sure it will be a favourable one. It would be positively wicked to object to ice cream, Ruth!"

They ate their ices, listened to the band, inspected the great conservatory, and devoted ten minutes to the Empress Theatre, in which a very noisy entertainment was being given.

"I shall never, never forget to-day," said Ruth, when they were sitting on the terrace resting after their exertions. "It has been like a day snatched from fairyland. I am afraid Penwyrr will seem duller than ever after this."

"You won't always live at Penwyrr," said Val, confidently, "and I shall be coming to pay you a visit before long."

Her sweet face brightened. "You will run away again in despair. Penwyrr is frightfully quiet. What should induce you to go there?"

"A variety of motives. Ruth, would you be sorry to leave Penwyr for good and all?"

"No," she replied, with sad frankness. "I have never liked it. But it is my home, and if I marry Ephraim Barclay I am not likely ever to leave it."

"Ephraim Barclay!" ejaculated Val, "who the deuce is he? I beg your pardon, Ruth, but I wasn't even aware of your being engaged. It has taken me completely by surprise."

"He is the doctor's son," explained Ruth, a dull, hopeless ring creeping into her voice. "He belongs to the Society of Friends, and is Aunt Rachel's wish that I should marry him some day. We are not exactly engaged, but it amounts to the same thing."

"And, of course, you are no end in love with him?" said Val Curzon, coldly, mentally cursing the absent Ephraim for daring to exist.

"No, that is what troubles me," she replied, her fair face aflame, her eyes drooping. "I can't love Ephraim. He is good, and I respect him very much, yet—"

"One wants to be able to feel something stronger than respect for their future partner in life. Is it not so, Ruth?" he interposed, gently, his brief fit of jealousy dissipated by her words. "You shall not be forced into marrying this man if I can prevent it."

"Aunt Rachel expects it of me," she faltered, "and I do not like to cross her wishes. She has been very kind to me since my father and mother died, leaving me quite unprovided for, and it is the wish of her heart that I should marry Ephraim Barclay. Yet I think of the two, if I could have my choice, I would rather die. He hasn't a desire beyond Penwyr, while I—I have so many."

"A marriage with him would crush you," said Val, fiercely. "Your fertile mind and warm, expansive sympathies require a wider social and intellectual horizon than Penwyr and Ephraim Barclay can offer you. Ruth, darling, would it give you less pain to become my wife were I to offer myself to Aunt Rachel as your husband, instead of Ephraim Barclay?"

"Your wife? Oh, Val, I did not even know you cared for me in that way!"

The tone was enough, so full of glad surprise and perfect loving trust.

"How could I help it?" he asked, with the feeling of reverence aroused by her pure unworlly nature still strong upon him.

"Ruth, sweet angel, give me my answer in three words—'I love you.'"

"I love you, Val, dear Val! I have done nothing to deserve such wonderful happiness. It almost frightens me. Are you quite sure that you have not made a mistake? I know that I am not like other girls, that I am ignorant and rustic—"

"Hush! that is why I love you, because you are not as other girls. You know nothing of coquetry, your nature is as clear as crystal. Love, candour, high principle, are the qualities I most admire in a wife, and you possess them all."

"And Aunt Rachel?"

"I am not afraid of her. She has been very gracious to me lately, and why should she favour Ephraim Barclay's suit before that of her own nephew? My strongest argument will be that we love each other, darling!"

The illumination of the grounds later on was a very beautiful sight. The falling, many-hued waters, the trees hung with burning jewels, the instantaneous transition from darkness to light, evoked Ruth's warmest admiration. Yet, in the midst of the fairylike scene she was conscious of a yet deeper delight that would still be hers when the brilliant grounds had relapsed into silence and darkness—the knowledge of Val Curzon's love.

He took her back to Verney Street when it was all over. The reaction in Ruth's case from so much excitement was beginning set in. She felt a little afraid of her own temerity.

"You will come to-morrow!" she whispered, as the cab stopped.

"Of course; until then say nothing. Now kiss me, darling, and run in."

She obeyed with the willing submission of love. Val waited until the door had closed behind her, and then drove away to his own rooms.

In the hall Martha Browning turned a frightened face towards the happy, radiant girl.

"To think that it should have happened so, Miss Ruth!" she said, despairingly; "your aunt—"

"Is that my niece?" asked a clear, cold voice from the top of the stairs.

Glancing hastily up, Ruth beheld Aunt Rachel and Ephraim Barclay standing by the drawing-room door in readiness to receive her.

CHAPTER V.

Feeling very much like a culprit in the presence of her judges, Ruth slowly ascended the stairs. As she did so, Aunt Rachel turned and re-entered the drawing-room. Only Ephraim Barclay stayed to speak to her.

"Why, Ruth, we could not imagine what had become of thee!" he said, kindly, in spite of his vexation. He knew that Aunt Rachel was very angry with the girl, and, man-like, he dreaded a scene.

"I have been with my cousin to Earl's Court Exhibition," explained Ruth, hastily. "He has only just left me at the door. What has brought you to town, Ephraim?"

"Business," he replied, dryly, leading the way into the drawing-room. "Thy aunt, who returned shortly after my arrival, has been in a sad state of anxiety about thee, Ruth."

Ephraim Barclay was a thick-set young man of medium height, with a square, fresh-coloured face, small, keen eyes, and mutton-chop whiskers. As an embodiment of sober, unemotional common-sense and respectability he was not to be surpassed.

Beyond this Ephraim Barclay's gifts did not carry him. Plodding, prudent, ambitious in his way, and fair-dealing, caring nothing for pleasure, it would have been hard to find a more deserving, worthy, and utterly uninteresting young man than Ruth's Quaker lover.

Once in the drawing-room, Aunt Rachel confronted her niece with a stern-set look on her fine old face, a look which Ruth secretly dreaded.

Aunt Rachel never stormed, but her great, deep anger when aroused was far worse to encounter than any sudden burst of passion.

"What is the meaning of this, niece Ruth?" she asked, coldly.

Ruth's sensitive conscience told her that she had done wrong in accompanying Val without her aunt's knowledge or permission. She was willing to be contrite, to confess herself in the wrong, so far as Aunt Rachel was concerned; but she felt strangely, pleasantly indignant with regard to Ephraim Barclay's opinion of her conduct.

His anger could not affect her any longer—he had ceased to be of the least importance in her eyes. To-morrow, only to-morrow, and Val Curzon would assert his right to claim her, a right that she was ready to endorse.

"Cousin Valentine asked me to go to the Exhibition with him, and I consented," said Ruth, determined to shield Val as much as possible. "Aunt Rachel, please do not be angry with us. The day was so fine, and—and I wanted so much to go. He took every care of me, and brought me home as soon as the illumination was over."

"Thou has taken advantage of my absence to be both disobedient and deceitful, Ruth," replied Aunt Rachel, severely. "Thy conduct has both surprised and disappointed me. Go to thy room at once. Thy cousin Valentine is also greatly to blame in this matter. I shall not forget to rebuke him when he appears in the morning."

This was an inauspicious prelude to the announcement of their engagement. It might go greatly against them. Aunt Rachel might refuse her consent.

Feeling very miserable, Ruth turned in silence to leave the room.

Then Ephraim Barclay, swallowing his jealousy and vexation, good-naturedly interposed.

"It was but a girlish escapade," he said, kindly; "and, after all, Ruth was with her cousin, Aunt Rachel. Forgive her this once, and she will not offend again; of that I am certain."

For the first time in her life Ruth proved ungrateful. She was inclined to resent Ephraim's words. They might have borne reference to some naughty child whose punishment he wished to mitigate.

How different this blunt, patronising kindness to Val Curzon's caressing, reverent love and devotion! Ephraim Barclay—square, sturdy, homespun, sensible, without an atom of romance about him—suffered terribly from comparison with handsome, courtly, debonair Val Curzon, a polished man of the world.

"I require no one to intercede for me," said Ruth, with a girlish dignity that made Ephraim open his eyes in astonishment. "If I have done wrong, I am ready to accept the consequences. Perhaps my cousin's explanation, when it comes, will serve to lessen Aunt Rachel's anger against us both."

"What has come over her?" asked Ephraim, blankly, when she had disappeared.

Aunt Rachel shook her head.

"I cannot tell," she replied; "the child perplexes me sadly. I have always found her submissive and obedient until now. Perhaps I have done wrong in allowing Ruth to see so much of her cousin, who is, I regret to say, a thorough man of the world, Ephraim. Once back in Penwyr, however, his influence over her will quickly fade, and I shall take care never to expose Ruth to temptation by bringing her to London again."

"I shall be ready to marry her in three months' time," said Ephraim, calmly. "My father is going to take me into partnership with him, and the sooner that Ruth and I settle down to the duties of married life the better. She will have a careful protector, then."

He loved Ruth in his quiet way, and feeling sure of winning her, no element of fear or passion ruffled the calm surface of his Quaker nature.

"Verily, it will be a happy day for me when I give her into thy keeping, Ephraim," said Aunt Rachel, in a softer tone. "Ruth is very dear to me, yet I cannot expect to live much longer, and I should like to see her married to a good trustworthy man like thyself ere I go."

Meanwhile, the subject of these remarks was indulging in the luxury of a good cry before retiring to rest.

It was such an unpleasant ending to a delightful day, a very pearl among days! What could have brought Aunt Rachel home so unexpectedly? And Ephraim Barclay! His unwelcome presence in town might serve to complicate matters, and render Aunt Rachel more unwilling to turn a favourable ear to Val's suit.

Ruth felt distressed and anxious, yet like golden gleams through a drift of grey clouds, the consciousness of Val's love, the happy hours they had spent together, came to cheer her.

Fate and Aunt Rachel could not be so cruel as to keep them apart.

When Val appeared, his easy, well-bred, albeit imperious manner would place another complexion upon affairs. His silver-tongued eloquence would induce Aunt Rachel to relent and smile upon their engagement. No one could possibly resist Val Curzon's pleading.

With this cheering thought to console her Ruth fell asleep, to dream confusedly of Val, and roses, and mellow chimes, and dancing lights, till the sun awoke her by shining full in her face.

Early as Val Curzon was in arriving, Ephraim Barclay had taken the wind out of his sails by full half-an-hour. The Quaker was chatting amiably with the two ladies,

when Val entered Martha Browning's little drawing-room.

"My Quaker rival, by Jove!" thought Val, swiftly, feeling both amazed and amused as he glanced in Ephraim Barclay's direction. "It must be he. Confound the fellow, how thoroughly at home he seems! What the deuce can have brought him to town just when he was least wanted?"

"Ephraim Barclay, my nephew, Valentine Curzon; my nephew, Valentine Curzon, Ephraim Barclay," said Aunt Rachael, rising and introducing the two men in orthodox Quaker fashion, while Ruth hovered timidly in the background.

A flash of recognition shone in Ephraim's small grey eyes as he steadily regarded the handsome young fellow in the irreproachable light suit for the space of a moment. Then a stern, almost contemptuous, expression overshadowed his square face. The hand that Val Curzon held out to him appeared to have escaped his notice. At any rate, he did not grasp it.

Aunt Rachael looked perplexed, Ruth indignant. Val Curzon's self-possession was in no wise disturbed, however, by the young Quaker's unconventional behaviour. He merely lifted his eyebrows and thence towards Aunt Rachael, as if no eccentricity was to be wondered at in a man dating from the wilds of Penwyry.

Ephraim understood the meaning implied, and the colour flew to his face.

"Mr. Curzon, you and I have met before," he said, roughly.

"Indeed! You have the advantage of me, then. I was not aware that I had had the pleasure of meeting you before to-day," replied Val, carelessly.

The Quaker was a miserable nuisance. What right had he to be there at all, when Val was impatient to unburden his heart to Aunt Rachael and make sure of the woman he loved?

"Two years ago we were staying at the same hotel in Paris," continued Ephraim Barclay. "You cannot already have forgotten what happened then? I wish from my heart, since you are related to Martha Hargrave, that we never had met."

"What do you mean?" demanded Val, wheeling abruptly round upon him. "Is it your intention to insult me, Mr.—ah—Barclay? I should advise you not to presume upon your acquaintance with these ladies to do anything of the kind. I was in Paris two years ago, but I can swear that I never met you there!"

"Ephraim, explain thyself," said Aunt Rachael, commandingly, "what hast thou against my nephew?"

"Simply this," replied Ephraim, tersely. "When I was staying in Paris, with the invalid gentleman who had engaged me as his medical attendant, Mr. Curzon put up at the same hotel. I was in the habit of meeting him every day at table d'hôte. It is impossible that he can have forgotten me. He had not been there long before he was challenged by a gentleman to whose wife he had made advances — dishonourable advances. They fought, and the French gentleman was severely wounded. Soon after this Mr. Curzon was wanted by the French police on a charge of circulating forged bank-notes. He decamped hastily without paying his hotel-bill, and from that day until now I have never seen him. That he should prove to be your nephew fills me with regret. Nevertheless, the truth must be told, if only to rid you of such an objectionable character. I—"

"You miserable liar!" flushed Val Curzon, beside himself with fury. "Do you mean to affirm that I and the swindler you mentioned just now are one and the same?"

"Certainly," said Ephraim, standing his ground. "If I were not positive as to your identity I should hesitate to bring such a serious charge against you. I recognised you directly you entered the room. Perhaps it will be as

well for you at once to leave it, while the opportunity is yours."

This was too much, even for Val Curzon. The words had scarcely left Ephraim's mouth ere he found himself at the other end of the room without the trouble of walking there.

"Aunt Rachael, Ruth, it is an infamous falsehood!" Val cried, hotly. "This fellow accuses me of being a libertine, a swindler. He pretends to recognise me, whereas I have never seen him until to-day. Am I to take such things calmly?"

"It was not necessary to knock thine accuser down, nephew," said Aunt Rachael, rebukingly. "Far better to refute the accusation, if, indeed, thou art able to do so."

"Of course I am. None the less he shall be made to suffer for the insult intended. Which hotel do you allude to?" demanded Val of the Quaker, who had picked himself up again, but, true to his tenets, refrained from returning the blow.

"The Hotel d'Angleterre."

"And I always stay at the Hotel de Paris," said Val, beginning to cool down and regret his violence. "It is a case of mistaken identity. I have never stayed at any other hotel in Paris."

"We can ascertain that by writing to the respective proprietors," said Ephraim, doggedly. "I will admit no mistake. Voice, features, all are the same. You cannot deceive me, Mr. Curzon."

"Aunt Rachael, you must decide between this man's story and mine," said Val, turning to the bewildered, distressed old lady. "It is my word against his at present. Will you allow your nephew to be unjustly branded as a libertine, a swindler, without any proof save the assertion of a fellow who, for aught I know, may be raving mad?"

"What can I say, what am I to think?" asked Aunt Rachael, sorrowfully. "You admit having been in Paris at the time, and Ephraim Barclay never told a lie in his life. Oh, Valentine! dear as you are to me, you must refrain from coming here until you have succeeded in refuting a charge so serious. If you have been led into evil ways—"

"Aunt Rachael, how can you doubt him?" cried an indignant young voice. "Valentine is incapable of the conduct imputed to him by Ephraim Barclay. There is a dreadful mistake somewhere, and till it is cleared up I, at least, can trust him implicitly. I know he is innocent."

As Ruth spoke, with glowing cheeks and bright eyes, half afraid of her own vehemence, yet determined to defend her lover, Val Curzon drew her towards him and kissed her before them all.

"Thank you, darling!" he said, gently. "So long as you trust and believe in me the rest matters little."

"Ruth! Valentine!" exclaimed Aunt Rachael, while Ephraim Barclay made a forward movement as if to separate the lovers.

"Aunt Rachael, yesterday, Ruth promised to be my wife!" explained Val, quietly. "It was my intention to ask your consent to our engagement in proper form. I hope when I have proved the unfounded nature of this gentleman's story that you will not refuse to give her to me."

"It is impossible," said Aunt Rachel, sternly. "I have promised Ruth to Ephraim Barclay. They are to be married three months' hence."

"I cannot marry Ephraim Barclay, aunt," replied Ruth, gently, but firmly. "I care nothing for him, therefore I should wrong him were I to become his wife. I do not wish to disobey you, but in this matter I must decide for myself. Valentine loves me and—and his love is returned!"

"You are a fooliah, disobedient girl," said Aunt Rachael, recovering from her surprise. "You are not old enough yet to decide what is best for yourself. Nephew Valentine, pray leave us!"

"Remember, Ruth, I hold you to your promise, to remain faithful to me till I am free to claim you!" were Val's parting words as he left the drawing-room in anything but an enviable frame of mind.

CHAPTER VI.

BOILING over with indignation, Val Curzon went straight away to Algy Cavendish's rooms, and acquainted him with all that had taken place in Verney Street.

"I love the girl," he wound up by saying. "Yet I shall never get her unless I can prove that Quaker fellow's story to be a pure fabrication!"

"Something evolved from his own inner consciousness," said Algy, musingly. "It's awkward that you should have been in Paris, though, at the time mentioned."

"Why awkward? Confound it, Algy, are you going over to join the opposition?"

"Don't be absurd, my dear boy. It's much too hot to lose one's temper comfortably. The case, as stated by you, amounts to this: Broadbrim accuses you of being identical with an amorous swindler who actually lived under the same roof with him for awhile. You indignantly deny the charge, and—very foolishly—knock Broadbrim down. The next thing is to prove your innocence and exact an ample apology. Now, can you tell me if your accuser is acting honestly according to his lights, or only playing a part?"

"I believe the fellow really takes me for a swindler, and that no one would be more surprised than himself to find he had made a mistake," said Val. "He was down upon me directly we met. Malice is out of the question. He was not aware of my liking for Ruth Inglefield until our battle had taken place. My little girl acted splendidly! She avowed her belief in me before them all!"

"Then if Broadbrim's story is genuine, as far as it goes, it must be a case of mistaken identity," continued Algy; "and it won't require much clearing up. Write to the proprietor of the hotel where you stayed, and get him to prove that you were actually there at the time when Broadbrim avows you hung out in close vicinity to himself. That ought to satisfy Miss Hargrave, surely! If you like I will call on her, and explain that such a charge, taken in connection with you, is simply absurd. A woman who knew more of the world would not have entertained it for a moment."

"Thanks, old man, I should be awfully grateful," exclaimed Val. "She'd very likely listen to you, whereas I am in her black books, thanks to Mr. Barclay and my boldness in making love to Ruth. I am forbidden to cross the Verney Street threshold again. You'll have to go soon, for they're off to-morrow."

"The afternoon will do," said Algy, caring little for his small, fair moustache. "I say, though!" he continued, with an amused smile, "what an important individual I am becoming, a sort of amiable go-between. Yours is not the only delicate business I have in hand, Curzon. Miss FitzMarkham has commissioned me to find out all I can with regard to the charming Mrs. Whycherley's antecedents. She wants to prevent a marriage between her father and that too-attractive widow."

"And have you discovered anything?" "I've got a clue," said Algy, "which may lead to rather a striking dénouement later on. At present prudence warns me to keep my own counsel. If the very walls have ears, why widows, don't you know—"

"Of course, you're only to refer to Mr. Weller, senior, to ascertain what they are capable of. You'll do what you can to help me in the Verney Street affair, Algy? It's the enormity of the charge and their belief in it that renders the thing serious."

"I shall represent myself as your guide, philosopher and friend, one who has known you from childhood upwards, and so on," said Algy lazily. "I shall express my firm belief in your shining virtues, your inability to do anything worse than leave your tailor's bill

unpaid. The hotel proprietor's letter will do the rest. You will be received back with open arms, and Broadbrim will be simply nowhere."

"If you can manage to say a word to Ruth—"

"Don't ask too much of me. I am but human. Once left alone with the lovely Quakeress I should forget you, and go in on my own account."

"In that case," said Val, laughingly, "I should have to console myself with the fair Aurelia. I feel all the better for our talk, Algy. I was almost off my balance when I came in just now."

"You looked as if you were thirsting for Broadbrim's blood!" murmured Algy. "There was a gleam in your eye suggestive of insanity."

"The fit is passing off, I shan't need a strait-waitcoat this time," said Val Curzon, as he rose to go. "By-bye, old man. Do the best you can for me, like the good fellow you are."

"Ta-ta!"

With these infantine, but fashionable salutations, the young men parted—Val Curzon going home somewhat relieved in mind, now that his cause was in Algy's hands.

Such a mad, unfounded charge must fall to the ground, he told himself confidently. Once let him get reinstated in Aunt Rachael's good graces, and it would be an easy matter to win Ruth.

How staunch and true and fearless the girl he loved had proved! It sent a little glow of pleasure through Val to recall her indignant look, and loving, trustful words. They almost reconciled him to Ephraim Barclay's annoying accusation, since but for that they would not have been called forth.

Algy Cavendish did not make Verney Street the scene of his first visit that afternoon. He was due at the FitzMarkham's house in Eaton Square, and he valued Aurelia's good opinion too much to annoy her by failing to put in an appearance when expected.

Colonel FitzMarkham was the sole occupant of the drawing-room when the tall footman ushered Algy in.

As the little man entered, the Colonel hastily thrust a note he had been reading into his breast-pocket.

"Oh! how d'y'e do, Cavendish?" he said, in his pleasant, boyish way, shaking hands with Algy. "Thomas, ask your mistress to come down. Aurelia is connected with no end of societies, you know, and they are always holding meetings," he continued, in rueful explanation. "She has only just returned from one of those meetings, and gone upstairs to take her things off."

"Miss FitzMarkham is destined to occupy a prominent position among highly-educated, public-spirited ladies," said Algy, admiringly.

The Colonel stroked the long, grey whiskers, and looked dubious.

"Ah, ye-es, I suppose so," he replied, hesitatingly. Fact is, Cavendish, a woman may be too strong-minded. She goes in for abstruse subjects, till she loses all sympathy with other women who are content to remain simply charming and gracefully domesticated, without troubling themselves about Greek and mathematics. Adorable women I call them, but Aurelia regards them with scorn."

This compliment, evidently intended for the absent Mrs. Whycherley, was almost too much for Algy's gravity.

He murmured something about various types of womanhood, each charming in its own peculiar style.

"Yes, exactly," acquiesced the Colonel. "And some day Aurelia will recognise this, at least I hope so. Marriage would, I am sure, tone down some of her very pronounced opinions. It had that effect in my case, anyhow."

"Miss FitzMarkham does not, I believe, approve of marriage?"

"Oh! but you know she can't always adhere to that line," said the Colonel, earnestly.

"She will have a good dowry, and sooner or later she must meet with some poor de—, I

mean some suitable partner, and make up her mind to marry him. He need not be very rich, since she has plenty of money. What a wife Aurelia would make, especially for a young and rising man!"

"But the loss to yourself!" reminded Algy, mischievously, wondering what on earth Aurelia would think or say could she but overhear herself being metaphorically thrown at his head by the affectionate Colonel.

"Of course, of course, I should miss her certainly, in more ways than one, but if her happiness were in question—Ah! there is Aurelia!"

The tall, pretty, clever girl accorded Algy an unusually cordial greeting.

Her speech at the meeting had been well received; it had elicited frequent cheers, it was to appear in the daily papers. Hence she was in a good mood, inclined to be civil even to that arch-enemy, man.

"What a gift is eloquence!" said Algy, humbly. "I couldn't make a speech if my life depended upon it."

"That is not true," said Aurelia, promptly. "You can speak well in public, Mr. Cavendish. I heard your voice frantically calling for more chairs in the middle aisle the last time I went to St. Aloysius' on a festival day, and it sounded quite pathetic."

"That is the way in which she turns upon everyone who offers her a compliment," interposed the Colonel, casting wistful glances in the direction of the door. "I—I am afraid I must leave you now. I have an engagement for five o'clock."

As he spoke he drew out his handkerchief, and a little perfumed note, addressed in a delicate Italian hand, fell to the ground.

Before the Colonel—blushing like a boy detected in his first love affair—could pick it up, the lynx-eyed Aurelia had possessed herself of the note. After a momentary glance at its contents she restored it to its owner, regarding him, meanwhile, with a stern, ominous expression upon her pretty, piquant face.

"I think you must postpone your engagement, papa," she said, in a tone that made the gallant old warrior shake in his shoes. Small wonder that he wished to be emancipated from such stern, but wholesome control.

"You forget Lady Smythe's 'At Home.' She will be offended if we are not there."

"But really, Aurelia—"

"Lady Smythe will take no denial, papa, accept no excuses. We are bound to go, and her 'At Homes' are delightful! One never meets any doubtful people there—in itself a great recommendation."

"Well, well, we'll see!" muttered the Colonel, resuming his seat. Aurelia took Algy Cavendish into the conservatory to admire a new orchid. While there they heard the street door bang violently; when they went back to the drawing-room it was empty.

"He's gone!" said Aurelia, her voice full of calm resignation to the inevitable. "What do you think, Mr. Cavendish? That note was from Mrs. Whycherley, telling him that she would be at Lady Mandeville's garden party this afternoon, and papa has gone there to meet her. We received invitations, only I would not go because I felt certain that horrid woman would be there. Is it not too annoying? She seems to exercise a spell over papa. His liking for the governess and the young shop person did not give me half the trouble that she has occasioned."

"They were not widows," said Algy, smiling under his moustache; "but there are means by which even widows may be vanquished."

"How? Have you ascertained anything dreadful about Mrs. Whycherley?" asked Aurelia, breathlessly.

"I am feeling my way towards an important fact that may prove a stumbling block in the way of her matrimonial designs upon the Colonel. At present I am not sufficiently advanced in my researches to say any more."

"Men are so slow and deliberate in all they do!" exclaimed Aurelia, impatiently.

"But if they succeed in the end?"

"They don't always. However, it is very good of you to try, and I must not be ungrateful. If I can only save papa from Mrs. Whycherley through your agency there will be at least one man in the world who is not absolutely hateful to me."

Algy felt that he was making headway fast with the champion of women's rights.

"Is the Colonel very fond of children?" he inquired, apropos of nothing.

"Fond of children! good gracious, no! They fidget him into a nervous fever. He is in agonies lest they should tread on his pet corn, or interfere with his collection of beetles and butterflies. He never will stay at any country house where the children come in with the dessert. I wish that horrid Mrs. Whycherley had half-a-dozen boys and girls. He would never look in her direction again."

"I don't think he will marry her as it is," said Algy, calmly. "There's many a slip between the cup and the lip, you know. By-the-way, I am quite busy at present, Miss Fitz-Markham, thanks to the friendly confidence reposed in me. I am involved in more than one love affair in which other people are the chief actors."

Willing to help Val Curzon, but quite unable to keep such a good story to himself, Algy acquainted his pretty companion with the exceptional nature of Val's wooing, and the unenviable position in which Ephraim Barclay's accusation had landed him.

Aurelia laughed and listened with all a woman's interest.

"How very odd that such a fashionable butterfly as Mr. Curzon should fall in love with a demure young Quakeress!" she exclaimed, wonderingly. "Is Miss Ingfield very pretty?"

"For those who admire that quiet, fair, pensive style of beauty—yes," said Algy, carefully avoiding the pitfall dug for him. "I prefer a more piquant face myself—a face full of light and change and brilliant diablerie."

"What very bad taste," said Aurelia, well aware that he had succeeded in describing herself. "How much I should like to see Miss Ingfield! Of course, Mr. Curzon is innocent of the crimes imputed to him by his Quaker rival—he must be?"

"He is or I should allude to them less lightly. Some absurd misconception is at the bottom of the whole affair, and I have devoted myself to the task of clearing it up."

"What a disinterested, painstaking individual you are! You deserve a monument."

"Thanks; but I am in no hurry to earn that distinction. You see, I have so much idle time on my hands, and Doctor Watts—"

"Never mind Doctor Watts—his ornithology at least was very faulty. He wrote 'Birds in their little nests agree,' whereas they don't; they fight like anything as soon as their feathers are grown. Now, if you have promised to go to Verney Street it is almost time you were there."

"I shall not fail to pour oil upon the troubled waters. All I hope is that the Quaker will be conspicuous by his absence."

"Why? Are you afraid of him?"

"Afraid! No!" Algy possessed a little man's sensitive feelings with regard to personal bravery. "I never saw the man I was afraid of yet, Miss Fitz-Markham—or the woman either. But it will be easier to introduce the painful subject if Mr. Barclay is not present."

"I understand. I only spoke in jest. Your courage is beyond doubt," said Aurelia, in a gentler tone. "You will let me know what success you meet with. I don't approve of love-making and nonsense of that kind as a rule; but there is something quite exceptional about Mr. Curzon's 'affaire de cœur.'"

"I will keep you duly posted in all the latest details. Meanwhile, I shall not forget the other transaction in which Mrs. Whycherley is concerned. It is shameful that you should have to stay here by yourself while

she is fascinating, or doing her best to fascinate, the Colonel."

"I don't mind that if I can only checkmate her later on," said Aurelia; and I think I shall succeed in doing so—with your help."

Algy went away to Verney Street while Aurelia FitzMarkham sat down to await her father's return from the much-disputed garden-party.

CHAPTER VII.

When Algy Cavendish sent his card up, Rachael Hargrave was more than half inclined to refuse him an audience.

Her strict sense of justice, however, came to Algy's aid, and induced her to see him, although he was Val Curzon's friend.

She had listened to Ephraim Barclay's accusation against her nephew, and it would be only fair and right to hear in turn what Algy might have to say in his favour.

The pure-minded, straightforward, old Quaker lady was feeling sadly perplexed and distressed. Not only had a serious charge been brought against her nephew, but he must needs add to the pain it had caused her by winning Ruth's heart, and rendering her unwilling to marry that sensible young man, Ephraim Barclay.

To Aunt Rachael the complication was a terrible one, while her slight knowledge of the world and its ways rendered her more unfit to cope with such an unexpected dilemma.

She could not permit Ruth to marry Val with such an imputation resting upon him, neither could she compel the girl to become Ephraim Barclay's wife against her will.

Bitterly did Aunt Rachael regret the impulse that had induced her to leave the peaceful village of Penwyr for the demoralising atmosphere of London.

Not even the attractions of Exeter Hall should ever induce her to set foot in such a dreadful place again.

There had been quite a scene in Verney Street after Val's departure.

Aunt Rachael had enjoined her niece to forget Val Curzon as soon as possible, and to renounce the idea of ever becoming his wife.

Ruth, in firm but gentle words, had declared her intention of remaining faithful to her lover under any circumstances.

Aunt Rachael hardly recognised the passive yielding girl in this fair, brave-spirited woman. Love had developed Ruth's nature rapidly, bringing all its best qualities to the surface, investing her with courage and reasonable self-assertion under unfair pressure.

That mild, well-meaning tyrant, her aunt, was about to commence a second exhortation on the duty of submission and obedience, when Ephraim Barclay interfered.

"Since Ruth finds it such a hard matter to accept me as her husband," he said, quietly, "I will relinquish all claim upon her. Heaven knows I had looked forward with joy to our marriage, but, aware as I am now of her aversion to me, I will not force her to become my wife. I will marry no woman who has declared that she cares nothing for me in the presence of another man. I should be sorry to see her wedded to that—that scamp, as I firmly believe him to be. At the same time, so far as I am concerned, Ruth is free."

His voice quivered as he spoke, and his grey eyes looked almost as if there were tears in them.

In his quiet, undemonstrative fashion, Ephraim Barclay loved Ruth, and to renounce all hope of winning her cost him a struggle.

"Nay, Ephraim, be not too hasty in thy decision," pleaded Aunt Rachael, whose heart was set upon the engagement. "Ruth is but young. She knows not her own mind, and—"

"Aunt Rachael, Ephraim has spoken wisely!" interrupted Ruth. "He understands that I am not free to marry him; that from henceforth we can be nothing to each other.

In this matter, at least, I know my own mind—I shall never change my opinion!"

"Surely, Ruth, we may continue to be friends?" urged Ephraim.

But Ruth, who should have been grateful to him for acting with so much generosity, remained hard as adamant. He had prejudiced Aunt Rachael against Val Curzon—in Ruth's eyes an unpardonable offence.

"I cannot regard you as a friend," she said, gravely, "while you persist in believing Mr. Curzon to be guilty of more than one crime of which I know him to be innocent!"

She knew! And three months ago Val Curzon had been a stranger to her. So much for the rapid growth of love and trust in a woman's breast.

"So the swindler and duellist I met in Paris had no existence, then, save in my own imagination?" retorted poor Ephraim, losing his temper at last. "A very satisfactory conclusion indeed for all, excepting myself, to arrive at!"

"I do not go so far as to cast any doubt upon your good faith," said Ruth, "or upon the existence of the man you name. I only maintain that in identifying him with Mr. Curzon you are acting under a mistake. I shall never think otherwise!"

Ephraim went away, angry and disconsolate, to write to the proprietor of the hotel where he had stayed when in Paris, respecting Valentine Curzon. Feeling himself to be in the right, it was hardly pleasant to be browbeaten, rebuked, and knocked down into the bargain, when he had only contemplated to unmask a scoundrel.

Matters were at a temporary standstill; a kind of armed neutrality, very terrible to both, had been established between Aunt Rachael and Ruth, when Algy Cavendish joined them.

Glad to find them alone, Algy plunged at once into the important subject of Val's innocence.

He eulogised his friend warmly as a man of unblemished honour and reputation, one whose conduct had never given rise to unpleasant rumours. His earnest, yet whimsical eloquence, treating the accusation as if it were a thing below serious discussion, succeeded in representing Val's supposed misdemeanours in the light of an impossible absurdity, even to Aunt Rachael.

"Why, my dear madam, should a man, enjoying your nephew's fortune and social status, deliberately ruin his own prospects by attempting to pass forged bank-notes?" urged Algy. "Paris is not so far distant from London as to enable him to do such a thing with impunity. Had he really done it, detection and punishment would have overtaken him long ago. Val Curzon is received in the best society without eliciting a remark. Should I be here now, pleading his cause, if I were not certain that he had never done anything unworthy of a gentleman? Really, the charge is too preposterous. Mr. Barclay will be expected to tender an ample apology!"

Aunt Rachael's face brightened. She was very fond of Val; nothing would give her more pleasure than to be convinced beyond all doubt of his innocence. As for Ruth, the gratitude shining in her soft, dove-like eyes was more than enough to repay any man.

"I hope very much that Ephraim Barclay may yet discover he has made a mistake in accusing my nephew of such disgraceful, unchristian conduct," said Aunt Rachael, earnestly. "You appear to have unlimited faith in him yourself."

"I have known him for years," continued Algy. "We were at Oxford together, and I never found Val out in a shady transaction yet. This affair has annoyed him awfully. I couldn't imagine what had happened when he came round to my rooms, Miss Hargrave."

"If he can prove his innocence, I shall be ready to receive him again," replied Aunt

Rachael; "but Ephraim Barclay is so positive that—"

"He must be met with proof—exactly. Val is going to write to the proprietor of the Hotel de Paris in order to convince you that he was really staying there two years ago, and not at the Hotel d'Angleterre, as affirmed by Mr. Barclay. He will also write to an artist friend who saw him off by the train to Boulogne on his way home. Might I request you, Miss Hargrave, to remain in town until Val can himself remove your last lingering suspicion?"

"Yes, it is only fair to my nephew. I will delay my departure until this vexatious incident has been finally disposed of, I trust, in a satisfactory manner. Meanwhile, I would rather not see Valentine. His presence here would but give rise to embarrassment."

"Oh, he won't come; he's too much annoyed, you know," said Algy, gravely, aware that Val's anger would most likely tell in his favour.

"It would grieve me sorely to be estranged from my sister's son," Aunt Rachael replied, regretfully. "Kindly tell him from me that—that he will meet with a favourable reception from both Ruth and myself when once I am assured of his innocence. From what you have said, I am more than ever inclined to think that Ephraim has made a grave blunder. It can be nothing else, since Ephraim is the soul of truth."

"In that case, he will have to apologise for speaking without sufficient warrant. My friend is not to be annoyed and insulted before ladies with impunity."

When Algy Cavendish was gone, Ruth knelt down beside Aunt Rachael, and kissed her timidly.

"Dear aunt, if I have been undutiful, if I have grieved you, forgive me," she said, pleadingly. "I ought not to have gone with Cousin Valentine, only it was so hard to say no. I will do anything you wish, with one exception—I cannot marry Ephraim Barclay."

Aunt Rachael laid her thin white hand gently upon the bowed, golden head.

"You would fain marry your cousin Valentine instead?" she said, thoughtfully. "Young hearts are hard to guide. I would that he were less a man of the world, Ruth, since he has won your love."

"Can you wonder that I love him?" murmured the girl.

"Perhaps not. Valentine has the manly beauty in which Ephraim is lacking, although of the two I should prefer seeing you wedded to the latter. As it is, I will give my consent to your engagement should Valentine succeed in refuting the charge brought against him."

"Aunt Rachael, how good, how kind you are!" exclaimed Ruth, gratefully. "And you forgive me for yesterday?"

"Yes; truly I had intended to rebuke Valentine for taking you to Earl's Court Exhibition—he was the more to blame—but the greater matter drove the lesser one from my mind."

Aunt Rachael stooped to return Ruth's kiss just as Martha Browning entered the drawing-room with a perplexed expression on her homely, pleasant face.

"Miss Ruth, would you mind coming down to my sitting-room for a few minutes to speak to a young French lady that I've got there?" she asked. "Ma'mselle wants a lodging, but beyond that I can't make out what she says. She's got very little English, and I've got no French, so it's awkward, you see. I've tried to make her understand that I don't let one room, which is what she asked for; but the poor thing seems dazed-like, as if she were in trouble, and I don't like to send her scold, especially as she is a stranger in London."

"Go, Ruth, and see what ails the young woman. Ascertain if she stands in need of any assistance," said Aunt Rachael, whose charitable instincts never failed her.

Ruth accordingly followed Mrs. Browning to her underground sitting-room. A tall, slim

French girl, with large, mournful, dark eyes, full of stumorous fire and passion, and a pure, olive complexion, rose from her seat as they entered, glancing swiftly from the landlady to Ruth.

She was handsome, in a litho, graceful, impulsive, foreign style, that had something feline about it. The tired, anxious expression on her face passed away, as she spoke in eager, animated tones to Ruth, delighted to find someone capable of fully comprehending her requirements.

She was a teacher of music, she said, and she had come to London from Paris in the hope of obtaining pupils. She had looked about for suitable lodgings till she was—oh! so weary. Would Madam consent to take her in, allowing her the use of the sitting-room in which to receive visitors? She could furnish satisfactory references from friends in Paris. No, she knew no one in London, but she had money enough to support her until she succeeded in meeting with employment. Once more, would Madam consent to receive her as a lodger? In that case she could send for her luggage, which was at the station.

Martha Browning hesitated, and Ruth wondered why so young a woman, speaking scarcely any English, should have left Paris and her friends there, to launch herself in London among strangers! The quick-witted Frenchwoman read the hesitation in the landlady's eyes and Ruth's questioning face aright.

"You wonder that I should come here alone, friendless, to earn my living," she said, plaintively, taking off her glove as she spoke, and displaying a wedding-ring upon her left hand. "Know, then, that I am married, and to an Englishman. I met him in Paris two years ago, and for six months after our marriage we lived together in almost perfect happiness. My husband was a gentleman of independent means—at least, so he told me. He went out one day, as usual, to go to the café that he frequented, but he never returned. Mon Dieu! I wonder it did not drive me mad! I spent every franc I had in searching for him, but from that day to this his fate remains a mystery to me."

"Poor thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Browning. "Does she expect to find him over here? Ask her, Miss Ruth."

"It is my last hope," said the Frenchwoman, in reply to Ruth's gentle inquiry. "He may have been murdered; Paris is a city the most terrible for secret crimes. Yet on the other hand, cruel as it sounds, my husband may only have deserted me. I fancy that his money was running short; he often appeared gloomy and morose. He would never enlighten me as to his affairs or his family, but I have heard him speak of London, and if he is still alive it is in London that I hope to find him. I have sought him elsewhere in vain. Perhaps here, in his own country, I shall be more successful. Meanwhile, I have resumed my maiden name, Marie Benquier. I will not use his until the horrible doubt is solved. Of the two, I would rather that my husband proved dead than false. You cannot tell how I loved and trusted him!"

"I'll take her," said Martha Browning, impulsively, "although I am not accustomed to let in that way. I couldn't refuse after listening to such a story, Miss Ruth!"

And that was how Marie Benquier became an inmate of the house in Verney Street.

CHAPTER VIII.

A satisfactory letter arrived from the proprietor of the Hotel de Paris in due course, and Val Curzon lost no time in submitting it to Aunt Rachael, through the medium of Algy Cavendish.

The Frenchman positively affirmed that Mr. Valentine Curzon had stayed at his hotel exactly two years ago, that he had paid his hotel bill before leaving, and behaved in every way as a gentleman while he remained there, his conduct exciting no comment.

Evidently the alleged duel and the forged bank-notes had not come under the writer's

notice, while his description of Val's personal appearance, given at the latter's request, tallied exactly with the original.

Alphonse Greville, Val's artist friend, also wrote, offering, if necessary, to come to England for the purpose of helping to clear him from Ephraim Barclay's charge by stating what he knew of Val's career while in Paris, which was all in his favour.

"You are too lazy, mon ami," said the vivacious Frenchman; "to have made violent love, fought a duel, and circulated forged notes within such a short space of time without demanding the assistance of a friend. On that ground alone I can swear to your innocence. Au sérieux, your accuser must be either a fool or a madman. Should you desire to call him out, and pay a visit to Calais sands some fine morning, I shall be happy to act as your second."

These letters and Algy's own influence proved too strong for Aunt Rachael. In the face of such evidence she could not reasonably continue to doubt her nephew. Indeed, she had no wish to do so. It gave her far more pleasure to be able to receive him back into favour with the damaging aspersion removed.

Since Ruth's happiness hung in the balance, depending upon a favourable verdict for her lover, his moral worth, or his want of it, had become a question of serious importance.

Happily the question had met with a favourable reply. Aunt Rachael decided in her own mind that Ephraim Barclay had confounded Val Curzon with some other man of the same name. She actually told him so in rather severe terms, requesting him to retract his accusation, and offer an apology.

But this Ephraim would not do. He stuck to his original opinion, sturdily, and refused to acknowledge himself in the wrong, not without some evidence to justify him in so doing.

In reply to his letter of inquiry, the proprietor of the Hotel d'Angleterre—where he had stayed with his patient—declared that a Mr. Valentine Curzon had been there at the same time; that he had been guilty of the various misdemeanours imputed to him, and that his hotel bill still waited to be settled. Val Curzon was accurately described in the letter. Unfortunately, the French gentleman injured in the duel had gone to South Africa with his wife. Otherwise Ephraim would have had their testimony as well to help him.

But when he showed this letter to Aunt Rachael it only succeeded in making her angry.

She had decided that her nephew was innocent. Consequently any evidence to the contrary was most unwelcome. It failed to shake her re-established belief in him.

She even began to suspect Ephraim Barclay of malicious motives in thus persistently attacking Val.

"I can only conclude that some worthless man, an adept in wickedness, assumed my nephew's name and passed for him, in order to escape detection, or to throw suspicion upon an innocent individual," she said, firmly.

"He has furnished me with ample proof that his conduct while in Paris was exemplary. I wonder, Ephraim, that such obstinate prejudice should emanate from thee."

"Could the cleverest rogue going have assumed Mr. Curzon's voice, features, manner, as well as his name?" demanded Ephraim, angrily, aware that all the others were ranged against him. "I am positive that I have made no mistake. I wouldn't retract a word that I have uttered, or apologise, to save my life!"

"I cannot answer thy question," said Aunt Rachael, severely, "but I fear, Ephraim, that some revengeful feeling, some dislike entertained against my nephew, influences thee in this matter. I expect him here to-day, and unless thou canst meet him in a friendly spirit, believing him to be, like thyself, an honest man, perhaps—"

"I had better stay away altogether," interrupted poor Ephraim, bitterly. "My opinion

agrees with yours. I should hardly care to meet Mr. Curzon, since I cannot regard him from any point of view but my own and—in the matter of Ruth at least he has done me grievous injury."

"Thus far I sympathise with you," began Aunt Rachael; but Ephraim had seized his hat and was half-way downstairs before she could finish her sentence.

The young Quaker felt sadly aggrieved. It was not to be wondered at that he disliked Val Curzon.

Val had robbed him of Ruth, whom he had, from a boy, regarded as his own peculiar property. Val had knocked him down, and estranged even Rachael Hargrave from him, when Ephraim had indignantly denounced him as a common swindler.

Fortune in this case favoured the supposed rogue rather than the honest man.

Ephraim's heart swelled with a sense of cruel injustice as he returned to his modest lodging, and prepared to leave town at once for Penwyrr.

They did not trouble themselves much about him in Verney Street, however. Algy had apprised Val of his success as a mediator, and Val had immediately put in an appearance, retaining a somewhat injured air that was not without its effect upon the two women.

In their respective fashions Aunt Rachael and Ruth strove to atone for the annoyance and the banishment to which the handsome martyr had been subjected.

Ruth smiled upon her lover with soft dove-like eyes, full of happiness; and Aunt Rachael, in a few kind words, gave her consent to their engagement.

Val's wounded feelings were not proof against such healing balm as this. He was his old radiant self again directly.

Aunt Rachael was considerate enough to quit the room presently on the plea of requiring some more wool for her knitting, thus leaving the lovers in undisturbed enjoyment of each other's society.

Val's first impulse was to imprison Ruth in his arms, and rain kisses upon her fair flower-like face, till she drew herself away from him with a shy maidenly modesty that constituted her principal charm in Val's eyes.

He was in the habit of flirting furiously with every pretty girl willing to join him in this pastime, but he would not have thought of making such a girl his wife. As a rule men do not care to marry a coquette, however much they may admire her and court her society.

Even a gay Lothario frequently chooses a quiet, modest, unassuming partner for life when he enters the state of matrimony, one who will never seek to win admiration and homage from other men; a woman to whom he can safely confide his name and his honour, certain that she will preserve both inviolate.

"My dear little girl, how can I ever thank you for proving so staunch when things looked very black against me?" said Val, fondly. "If I had needed any proof of your love, your refusal to think evil of me would have been more than sufficient!"

"I knew that Ephraim had mistaken you for someone else—that you were innocent of the dreadful charges he brought against you," she murmured. "Oh, Val! I have been so unhappy, so anxious for you to refute those charges, not on my account, but to satisfy Aunt Rachael!"

"And she is satisfied?"

"Yes. Is it not good of her to consent to our engagement? I know it was her wish that I should marry Ephraim Barclay, but she has set it aside and accepted the new engagement without a reproachful word."

"What has become of that amiable individual, Mr. Barclay? Algy says that he adheres to his undilating opinion of me in spite of all that has been said in my favour."

"He was here this morning," said Ruth, gently, "but he will not come again. I think he is going back to Penwyrr. Aunt Rachael is angry with him for being so obstinate. Is it

(Concluded on page 425.)

EILEEN'S ROMANCE

By FLORENCE HODGKINSON

Author of "Vernon's Destiny," "Ivy's Peril," "Royal's Promise," etc., etc.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

In the prologue we are introduced to Lady Helen Percy, who is alone in her boudoir, playing with her little son, when she is startled by the unceremonious entrance of a woman who turns out to be the first wife of her husband. The shock was too much for Lady Helen, and although she lingered for some months, never recovered. Henceforward, John Percy, the millionaire is dead to the world, and only cares for the son she left behind her.

Lucy Courtenay is engaged to Alan Ernestcliff, and both families heartily approve of the match. They are spending August at Boulogne. Among other visitors are Mr. Desmond and his two daughters, Maude and Ellen.

Bob Ernestcliff has fallen desperately in love with Maude Desmond, and takes his friend Basil Courtenay into his confidence. While on the sands one morning Eileen strays beyond her depths, and is in danger of drowning, when Basil rescues her, an incident that has far-reaching effects for him.

Mr. Desmond has now become Lord Desmond, through the death of his father, and they have taken up their residence at Desmondville, Yorkshire. Maude Desmond does all she can to suppress her sister Eileen. Lord Desmond is too weak to interfere. There is living at the lodge at the gates of Desmondville a Mrs. Venn, who pays for the privilege, and it is evident has an object in so doing.

CHAPTER XII.

DARE not! Oh! I dare not! She would be so angry!"

These were the words which came from poor Dorothy's trembling lips in reply to the doctor's appeal to her to confide in her cousin. May shrank back with a pained look on her kind face as she answered—

"I am never angry with you, Dolly."

"She does not mean you," whispered Dr. Macdonald. Then going back to his chair by Dorothy's sofa, he asked her, "If you are in trouble why not confide in someone? Surely your grief would be easier to bear?"

Dorothy only shook her head.

"She would not let me!"

"Miss Courtenay," said Dr. Macdonald, gently, "don't you know you are safe in your uncle's house? No one can molest you here without Lord Vivian's knowledge. You have nothing to do but to keep up your spirits and get well. Your cousin and her nurse will see that no one comes near you against your wishes."

Dorothy turned her face away with a sigh.

"Don't you trust them?" asked the doctor.

"Perfectly, but they can't help it. No locks or bars can keep me free. The moment I am alone she comes!"

"Then, my poor child, the remedy is simple; you must never be left alone."

"But that would make her angry. And, oh! you don't understand! I dare not anger her. I am in her power!"

A less experienced man might have pressed more questions, but Dr. Macdonald did not ask a single other one; he only took the little wasted hand in his and bade the girl good-bye as kindly as though she had been a little child he had known for years.

May Delaval followed him from the room. She knew her mother would expect to see him before he left the house, but she wanted a few words with him first. The solemnity of his manner almost frightened her as he turned into her boudoir.

"Lady May, do you feel brave enough to fight that poor child's battle? I warn you, it is no easy one."

"I will do what heart and strength can!" answered May. "I am very fond of Dorothy, and I can't bear to see her in this state!"

"Mr. Goldsmith told me your theory on the subject."

"I expected you to laugh at it."

"My dear young lady, I have seen too many strange things to laugh at any honestly-believed theory. In the present case I think with you your cousin's illness is of the mind,

not the body. I believe that some person has obtained a remarkable influence over her, and is now using it for a cruel purpose."

"And that is mesmerism?"

"Not precisely. Mesmerism has done much useful work, and worked many cures; but it has one fearful risk. In the hands of an unscrupulous person it can be put to a perverted use. I believe, Lady May, that this would explain your cousin's state. The will is not a strong one; that once conquered by the experimenter it would be easy enough to throw her into a state of hypnotism."

May shook her head.

"I never heard of such a thing."

"It means paralysis of the will. In such cases the poor victim has literally no will at all, but is a helpless tool in the hands of superior force. Before now, Lady May, men have committed murders and even taken their own life while in this fearful condition."

May shuddered.

"You don't mean that——"

He understood the broken sentence.

"I don't mean that poor Miss Courtenay has killed anyone, or done any similar heinous sin, but it looks to me as though the poor girl had been led to some rash act of which she bitterly repents. When in her natural state the influence is abhorrent to her, but she is powerless to shake it off. She probably knows it would be an immense relief to tell you everything, and yet she has been brought into such complete subjection to a stronger will she dares not speak."

May's eyes gleamed with anger.

"And you think this is right. You, a man, permit such cruel persecution to go unpunished?"

"Softly, softly," pleaded the doctor. "Firstly, I do not think it right, but very, very wrong; secondly, I do not mean it to go unpunished; but remember, I saw Miss Courtenay for the first time to-day, and the case is one of almost unparalleled difficulty."

"Forgive me," said May, penitently, "but it makes me frantic when I see Dorothy like this."

"The difficulty is to break the spell. A person once thrown into the state of hypnotism is peculiarly liable to it again. I cannot explain it to you, Lady May, but if the will has once been subdued into complete submission, meetings between the victim and the tyrant are by no means necessary. If Miss Courtenay's enemy (you see I adopt your own term) possesses the powers I credit her with, she could influence your cousin from any distance."

"It sounds like witchcraft."

"Such cases are rare in the extreme. I would never, not even to save life, allow anyone I cared for to be subjected to such an influence, since the spell cannot be broken against the wish of the operator."

"Are you sure of that?" asked May, gravely.

"Not quite. But think for yourself. Dread of this mysterious influence is apparent in your cousin's every word, and yet she dares do nothing to free herself. She knows a word to you would help her, but she is too frightened to speak it."

"And she is to suffer like this for life?"

"I hope not. The spell must be broken. Surely pressure can be put on this woman to induce her to free her victim. From Mr. Goldsmith I gathered you knew who it was."

"I believe I do."

"And you will tell me? Of course, your confidence is sacred."

May hesitated.

"My mother would never forgive me if she knew I brought such a charge. She and papa are both infatuated with the young lady. She

comes of a family equal to our own, and is of great beauty."

"Is it possible you mean Mrs. Westwood's niece and companion, Miss Desmond?"

"Yes, it is possible. You know her?"

"I have met her."

"And you think she possesses this gift?"

"As she and her aunt have made a handsome income between them for years by mesmeric cures, I know she has the power. Mrs. Westwood pursues her profession secretly, and under an assumed name. I don't believe one of the people who associate with her at Scarborough or the Isle of Wight have an idea how she spends her time in London. I fancy her own son does not suspect the truth."

"But you know it?"

"I know the ladies have lived at Brompton for some years during the season, and have won for themselves considerable renown by their reputed cures. I might never have guessed their identity but for being called in to attend the elder during a sharp illness. Mrs. Westwood was induced to confide in me. Her niece had left her and gone abroad; she was getting old, and I think the life she led undermined her health."

"Oh, Dr. Macdonald, it all seems so clear! It is Cyril Westwood who loved Dorothy and has been made to forsake her, and his mother always wanted him to marry his cousin. Don't you think it all looks plain?"

"Yes," agreed Macdonald thoughtfully, "up to a certain point; these two women, both endowed with fatal mesmeric powers, resolved to separate Miss Courtenay and her lover; thus far I follow you perfectly, but I gather that Mr. Westwood is in Africa. The cruel scheme has succeeded perfectly; then why need they torture the poor child further?"

May shivered.

"What did she mean by saying I was safe?"

"There are certain persons who, from some constitutional peculiarity, resist all efforts to mesmerise them; probably you are of the number. People in perfect health and with no nervous fancies are usually hard to affect."

"But Dorothy seemed perfectly well."

"Still, she is of a highly sensitive organisation, which explains a great deal. Lady May, I am glad you have trusted me; you shall not find your confidence bestowed in vain."

Very different was his interview with the Countess. He told Lady Vivian Miss Courtenay was certainly in delicate health, but care and good nursing would, he hoped, do wonders. It was an excellent thought to bring her to London, as change was often most useful in such cases; and Lady Vivian, who was the kindest and most hospitable of women, wrote off to her sister-in-law declaring Dorothy must stay with her at least three months, when she hoped to send her home strong and well.

Mr. Goldsmith managed a tête-à-tête with Lady May again that very day. He looked troubled when he heard the result of the physician's visit.

"I don't like it," he said, simply. "You know I saw a good deal of Miss Desmond some weeks ago, and I am afraid you will find her a dangerous foe."

"I don't like it either," confessed May; "mamma being so fond of her makes it all the more difficult. Isn't it strange, Mr. Goldsmith, that Lucy, her brother Basil, and myself should all have felt an instinctive fear of Miss Desmond?"

"Very strange."

"You are thinking of something else," accused May. "Your thoughts are far from Dolly!"

"I was thinking of Cyril Westwood."

"Oh," and May gave a little disdainful toss of the head; "you need not think of him, if he has so little faith in Dolly as to believe the first person who speaks against her, he deserves to lose her."



A STRANGE WOOING.

"You don't know what he has been told?"
 "People should never believe what they hear."

Adam lowered his voice.

"Lady May, bear with me just a minute. You judge Westwood harshly. He may have been deceived as well as poor Miss Courtenay. You say she is in mortal terror; that something she has done—or believes she has done—haunts her. Don't you think there may be something in this? Could she not, while acting under this hateful influence, have written to Mr. Westwood breaking off their engagement?"

"It is a wonderful theory!" said May, frankly, "and would explain everything; but unfortunately it won't do. You see, they were not engaged."

"You need only vary the theory—the main belief is the same. I know Westwood a little. We are not intimate, but I have seen enough of him to pledge my word he could not play the part you ascribe to him. He would never have left Miss Courtenay after his open allusion to her without some reason. Until to-day I despaired of finding a motive; now I can see it clearly. While under his cousin's influence the poor girl was induced to write to him a letter that parted them for ever."

"But what could it be about?"

"A hundred things. Remember, the real author of it would be not Miss Courtenay, but Maude Desmond. Knowing the character of the man she had to deal with, it would be easy to her to write a letter, which, while parting them, should yet disgust him so completely, that he would never seek an explanation. She may have told him—writing in Miss Dorothy's name, remember—she cared for someone else, and so begged him to desist from a useless suit."

"But to write that letter would be the work of a fiend."

"Granted. But women of the Maude Desmond type do become little less than

fiends when they give themselves over to jealousy and malice! Remember, too, she would not write these words herself. She would dictate them to her victim, who, in her trance-like state, would write them down without a thought of their meaning. Granted that such a letter was sent to Cyril Westwood in Miss Courtenay's writing, which he probably knew perfectly, could you blame him if he believed it?"

"No," whispered May, falteringly; "perhaps not."

"Supposing this letter, written on Miss Ernescliffe's wedding-day—cast your mind back to the after part of the day—can you remember if Miss Courtenay was at all with Maude Desmond?"

"She was with her a great deal. Dolly offered to show the strange guest over the Hall. I went with them part of the way, but I never feel easy in Maude Desmond's company, and so I came back to the drawing-room. I was a little vexed, I recollect, at Dolly's fondness for a stranger I disliked. If only I had stayed with them instead of selfishly seeking my own pleasure, all this misery might never have happened, for the next day would have seen Dolly safely engaged to Mr. Westwood."

"You must not reproach yourself," said Adam, gently; "but do try and remember exactly what happened. Were your cousin and her friend absent any time?"

"Nearly two hours. I recollect my aunt grew anxious. Dolly had a kind of dazed look in her eyes when she came back, and Maude explained it by saying the bright light of the gas seemed blinding after the gloom of the empty rooms they had been exploring. We had a kind of high tea then, and very soon after Dorothy went to bed."

"Depend upon it, the spell was worked then. Whatever parted your cousin and Westwood was contrived in that exploration of the Hall."

"And then?"

"The rest seems to me easy: Hurt and sad from Mr. Westwood's desertion, Miss Courtenay would naturally avoid her mother and those who had expected to see her his fiancée. Miss Desmond was his cousin, and no doubt that fact attracted Miss Dorothy to her. The influence over her became strengthened, and when she thought she had riveted her chains strongly enough, with the cruelty of a harpy, Miss Desmond turned on her victim, and told her how she had parted her from her lover."

"But that would surely alleviate Dorothy?"

"The chains were too secure by this time for the victim to escape. I can't tell—I can form no idea of what was in the letter which parted the lovers, but I am quite sure some letter was written—written, too, with Miss Courtenay's own pen in her own hand. I think there must have been something in that missive she blushes to recollect—the thought of which tortures her. Probably, poor child, she does not understand the influence brought to bear on her. She wrote it. This much she knows, and the knowledge makes her ashamed; but how she came to write it she has no idea. She is hemmed in on all sides. If she threatens an appeal she is taunted by the threat that Miss Desmond will expose the letter. To Cyril Westwood she cannot speak. It would, she feels, be like asking him to forgive her. All other confidantes are forbidden to her by her persecutor's threat of revealing what she wrote to her lover on that fatal afternoon."

May looked up at him with wondering eyes.

"How can you think of it? I feel you have explained all that puzzled me, but how did you do it?"

"You admit I may be right?"

"I feel you are. But, Mr. Goldsmith," she hesitated, "your discovery is wonderful, but it does not help us to bring back

Dorothy's peace of mind. Your theory, marvellous as it is, only makes the case seem quite hopeless!"

"Nothing is hopeless, save death."

"But Dorothy can do nothing."

"Miss Courtenay can do nothing. Even were she well and free from this awful terror, which saps her strength, she could not stir in this herself."

"And Basil will not. I know he longs to call Mr. Westwood out, but he can't, because his father is Cyril's heir-at-law."

"Besides, duels are out of fashion. Lady May, I see no one who can act in this matter but myself. Will you trust your cousin's interests in my keeping?"

"I would trust you with anything in the world!" said May, warmly. "But I do not see how even you can undo this cruel knot."

"You cannot go to Africa, Lady May. If your cousin Basil went, or even Sir Bryan, the world at large would declare it was in pursuit of Mr. Westwood. Besides, thinking himself—as he probably does—deeply injured, he would be sure to avoid anyone of the name of Courtenay. Now, if I chance to be travelling in Algiers and come across him, what is there to make him think our meeting anything but an accident. I have met him just often enough to be on friendly terms, but I know nothing of his private life. I have the reputation of being a born rover, so it cannot strike him as strange that I have elected to exchange English fogs for a winter in the sunny south."

"And when you have found him?"

"That depends on the news I have from you. If Miss Courtenay is better, I should pave my way gradually, and try to become really intimate with him before I hinted that she had had a strange and mysterious illness which none of us could explain; but if she were still in this state, I should go to him boldly and tell him that the niece of those I counted my dearest friends was lying on a bed of sickness from which I believed it was in his power to raise her. I should tell him all I have said to you, and if he is the man I think, he would return with me at once."

"And that would save her?"

"I think so. Just now, abject terror of Maude Desmond seems the strongest feeling of her nature, but I believe myself that would give place to a passion yet more potent—love."

"And I always fancied you did not believe in love?"

"You wronged me!"

"I'm sure mother has tried to convert you times out of mind."

"Lady Vivian has tried to convert me into a married man times out of mind; but she never sought to make me into a lover. There was no need. Perhaps I feel for Cyril Westwood so keenly, because I know so well what love means?"

May Delaval well nigh forgot Dorothy's affairs in her intense interest at this last speech.

"Did she die?" asked the girl, gently. "I am quite sure you would never have cared for anyone unworthy!"

"She did not die; and you are right, she is not unworthy," replied Goldsmith, earnestly.

"Did she marry anyone else?"

"No."

"Then there is hope yet. She may care for you?"

"I shall never ask her!"

May looked bewildered.

"You must be mad. If you love anyone, you are bound to tell her so. You may be spoiling her life as well as your own!"

"I think not!"

"Is she in England?"

"Yes!"

"And do I know her?"

"Yes!"

"Well!" and May spoke with unusual bitterness. "You have kept your secret to some purpose. I have never once seen you with anyone I ever fancied you cared for."

"Perhaps not!"

"And it is cruel of you not to speak to her."

"Can't you understand!" he said, gently. "I dare not speak to her. May, my darling, I never meant my secret to pass my lips. I know you are as far above me as the stars in heaven, but, all the same, I have been mad enough to love you. Had you not been an Earl's daughter, the last representative of a noble name, I should have told you long ago that in all the world yours was the only face for me."

May looked into his face with a strange, sweet smile. It was more reproachful than surprised.

"I can't help my father being an Earl," she said, simply, "and it is not exactly my doing that I am an only child. Don't you think you have treated me a little hardly?"

"I think you are an angel," said poor Adam, sadly, "and it was mad presumption of me to tell you of my love; but you drew my secret from me before I knew it." Then, after a pause, "and, after all, my love cannot harm you. There is no need to tell me it is hopeless. I know that too well myself. In the years to come, when you are a Duchess, it won't hurt you that far away an honest heart beats for you!"

"I shall never be a Duchess!" said May, quickly, "you may be quite sure of that. What I want father to do is to adopt Basil Courtenay. There are plenty of younger sons to uphold Uncle Bryan's title and dignity. Basil always took after our family, and he would make a famous master for the Court. Perhaps in time to come my father might obtain that the peerage should descend to him. As for me, I have my godfather's property, which is rather more than I can spend."

"Why should you wish to disinherit yourself?"

"I don't. I should still be a kind of heiress. Father longs to know who is to come after him at the Court. Now, I have no idea of marrying, while Basil is engaged to a charming girl, so that if father would only see things as I do, he might gratify my own wishes and make two deserving young people superlatively happy at the same time."

"And you?"

"How you harp about me!" said May, a little pettishly. "Well, I suppose I shall settle down into a tolerably contented old maid, since no one I care for will ever ask me to marry him."

"May!"

"I think," returned May, with flashing eyes, "before deciding I was to be a Duchess you might have ascertained my own views."

"You know I worship you!"

"I never dreamed of it till to-day, and I have serious doubts of the fact even now!"

"You might take my word, I think!"

"But your actions are so opposed to it. If you care about me, why do you take such pains to convince me that under no possible circumstances would you propose to me?"

His face blanched. For a moment May regretted her question as she saw the look of anguish which overspread his features.

"Forgive me!" she began; but he interrupted her, and went on.

"I will tell you. The reason which forbids my asking Lord Vivian for his child is no sin of mine—no sin of the father who worshipped me, or the fair young mother I never knew; but yet the fact remains in cruel force. I, Adam Goldsmith, the so-called prosperous banker, am, in the eyes of the law, nobody's child."

May Delaval's hot tears gathered in her eyes. Involuntarily she stretched out her hand and put it into his.

"Why should you mind?"

"Listen. I would rather you knew all. When my father was dying, he told me the secret he had guarded so jealously. He was a self-made man, and had risen from the ranks. In youth he married a woman of his

own class. Their union was one long misery, and at last he was glad to give her the lion's share of what money he had, and pay her passage to America, on condition of being left in peace. The ship she was to sail by, in which her berth was taken, went down with all hands. Her name appeared in the list of passengers of the lost ship. What moralist, however stern, could blame my father in that, seeing this, he believed her dead?"

"The years went on. He grew rich and prosperous. He went into the world and was received by its noblest citizens. At last, in middle age, he married."

"You have heard the Countess speak of my resemblance to an elder sister of hers who died when she was a mere child. It is not surprising I should be like Lady Helen Percy, for she was my mother."

"The marriage was four years old, and it was more than twelve since the 'Duke of Wellington' had been wrecked when the blow fell."

"Don't say any more," pleaded May. "I understand; she had not sailed in that ship—she reappeared?"

He bowed his head.

"I don't think she was hard. I know she never threatened exposure. She went quietly back across the Atlantic; but her absence could not restore the happiness she had wrecked."

"My little sister was born and in her grave. For weeks my mother's life hung in the balance, then as she grew better they mapped out their future. I was to be sent to my grandparents (you must remember them, Lady May, since they bore the same relationship to you), while my father took my mother abroad. He was to return alone, and as a widower, while she lived in retirement. It was cruelly hard on both, but less painful than publishing their miserable story."

"I remember," said May. "I have often heard mother speak of Aunt Helen's death, and how cruel they felt it that Mr. Stone separated himself and his little boy from them so completely, but I always thought they died."

"That report was circulated. My father wished to break off all connection with the Reny family; but he had a stronger reason. My mother was quite young—a mere girl. In the eyes of the law she was free to marry whom she could, if he could only make her believe him dead."

"There was little doubt, with her beauty, she would find someone to cherish her. As a fact, his ruse succeeded. He heard of her marriage to an officer, who had known and loved her in girlhood. She went to India and died there."

"She had a strange history, parents living—brother and sister—and yet forced to be as dead to them."

"My father only told me the truth when he was dying. In Heaven's sight, he said, no blame attached to my mother or himself; but the fact remains."

"What does it matter?" asked May. "It must have been an awful trial to them, but you are known and respected as Adam Goldsmith. No human creature would even connect you with the son of Mr. Stone and my poor Aunt Helen; besides, even if they did what harm could it do you, since the law in their marriage was never known?"

"It was known to one person," said Goldsmith, slowly, "my father's first wife!"

"And is she living?"

"Yes, but I have no fear of her betraying me. She is now a very aged woman, and quite harmless."

"I have received a letter from her not long since (not stating her identity, but of that I have no doubt), asking me to act as executor to her will."

"No, I see no fear of the sword falling; but you must remember nothing can undo the truth. I have no name, and how can I seek to marry the Earl of Vivian's heiress?"

"If you loved me you would not think so much of trifles."

"Trifles!" echoed the banker, bitterly. "Don't you know what the world would call my conduct if I married you and my miserable story came to light? As to my love, you would not doubt it if you knew what it has cost me to be near you all these years and yet keep silent."

"And I thought once you were going to marry Maude Desmond; mother quite believed it."

"I never cared for her!" said Goldsmith, slowly. "but I was very near proposing to her. It seemed to me if once my love for you were a sin it would be easier to conquer it. Though my miserable position barred my marrying you, it need not be an obstacle, I thought, in the case of such a wife as Miss Desmond."

May opened her eyes.

"You credited me, then, with being able to appreciate you for what you are, though it seems you judge me incapable of valuing anything but a title?"

"You misunderstand me; I am a rich man. It seemed to me my wealth might induce a portionless bride to risk the storm which, after all, might never break."

May looked at him with a strange soft light shining in her sweet, brown eyes.

"Well, you know now that if I have any power with my father—and people tell me I have a great deal—I shall not be his heiress. I hope Basil will be master of Vivian Court, and bring his young wife there. And I—I shall be a lonely old maid!"

"Child—child. Is it possible that you can?"

"The obstacles are impassable," said May, gravely. "I always respected you more than any man I knew. When my mother was bent on match-making for you, I always felt a kind of dim fear if she succeeded I should lose a friend whose place no one else can fill, but I never guessed until to-night that you cared for me. I mean that you fancied you cared."

"May, is that fair?"

She smiled.

"Is it fair to me to assume I care for nothing but rank?"

"May, do not tempt me; tell me just this one thing, my darling—if I went to your father with my miserable story, and he did not forbid me to hope, what would your answer be?"

May looked at him demurely.

"That would be going quite the wrong way to work. Tell my mother you are her sister Helen's son, tell her of the cruel mistake which spoils two lives, and ask her if it need blight a third. She will say that no one in the world could be so welcome to her child as you."

"And?"

"But you are not to speak yet," said May, with a pretty air of imperiousness. "Because we two are going to be happy together some day, we must not forget poor little Dolly."

Miss Courtenay had gone utterly out of Adam's head, and he confessed as much.

"We can trust each other," said Lady May, simply; "you and I can never be parted save by death. Don't you think, before we enjoy our own happiness, we ought to try and help Dorothy and Mr. Westwood? It was a noble plan of yours to go to Algiers and fall in with him as though by accident. You won't give up the idea, will you, just because I am not the mercenary creature you fancied me?"

"I will go wherever you send me, dear one, if you can promise your bright youth to a sober, middle-aged man like me. It is but a little thing to undertake, the quest you are set on."

"Spoken like a very knight of olden times," said the girl, gently; "I should never have thought of seeking out Mr. Westwood had you not suggested it, but now it seems to me the one plan."

"I believe it is," confessed Adam, gravely. "He is so true and loyal-hearted he could not have treated your cousin so cruelly without believing he had good cause; besides, my darling, if this terrible state continues, we cannot hope for Miss Courtenay's speedy recovery."

May shivered.

"Do you mean she will die?"

"I hope not, I trust not; but it is all so strange, so mysterious. I believe when persons have once been the victims of hypnotism only three things can rescue them. The will of the operator which, of course, can restore them at once to their natural powers, or the employment of another influence stronger even than that which has been exercised so fatally. Now, we neither of us believe, if Miss Desmond has this power over your cousin, she would willingly relinquish it. It remains, therefore, to try whether love cannot conquer fear, whether the sight of Cyril Westwood once more her trusting friend, would not save Miss Courtenay from the awful terror under which she lies."

"You said three things," observed May, feverishly. "And you have only named two. What is the other?"

"I would rather not tell you."

"But I would rather know."

"I meant death," he replied, reluctantly.

"If Miss Desmond died, her power over your cousin must cease."

"You were not thinking of her death," insisted May. "You had poor Dorothy in your mind."

"May," he suggested, quietly. "I honestly believe nothing ails your cousin that Cyril Westwood's presence and tenderness could not remove; but if she is allowed to go on in this state, fretting herself into a fever by day, wracked by fear at night, how can her fragile frame stand such protracted misery?"

"You are right," May looked into her lover's face as though to her, at least, he always must be right, and then added, cheerfully, "When can you go to Algiers?"

It was a singular request to make of a man who had but just confessed his love for her—strange that her first desire should be to send him away to another continent; but Adam Goldsmith understood May's inmost thoughts, and was well content to do her bidding in this and in all her desires.

"I can start on Saturday; but, May, shall I speak to Lord Vivian first?"

"No. We can trust each other, and Dolly cannot be saved too soon. Please go on Saturday."

"I will do so, and you shall know as soon as I am on Westwood's track; but then you must send me instructions."

"You will manage without any."

"No. If Miss Courtenay is better, there will be no occasion for undue haste. I can wait until my intimacy with Westwood has ripened so far that interference with his private affairs would not seem quite such a liberty; but if her strength is failing, if you are more anxious about her than you are now, I must go to the point at once, and say, simply, 'Dorothy Courtenay is dying, as her cousin believes, from your estrangement. Will you go to see her before the end?'"

May looked at him trustfully.

"And you would even say that?"

"Surely; but only if there were real need. If that poor child were in danger of her life, there would be no reason to stand on ceremony. One would do anything to ease her last hours."

"I see. I will write constantly."

"If she grows suddenly worse, telegraph," was the unexpected reply. "I shall send you my address at once."

"It is good of you to go; but—"

"You will miss me just a little?"

"I shall miss you terribly! But that is not what I meant. You are the only creature who shares my fears about Dorothy. I dare not tell my mother of them. I shall have no one to advise with when you are gone; all will rest on me."

"You can trust Macdonald," said Adam, gravely; "he is true as steel, and for some reason I cannot fathom, has a great dread of mesmerism. I should say, be guided by him in all things."

"And if there is a talk of Miss Desmond coming here?"

"Do not wait for there to be a talk of it. Persuade the Countess to let you take Miss Courtenay to the Court at once. Maude Desmond has already been many weeks from home; she might consider Park Lane a kind of half-way house between Blankshire and York; but depend upon it, if she returned to her own county she must go straight to her father's. It sounds a paradox, but you are far safer from her there than here."

"And do you think you shall be gone long?"

Adam shook his head.

"I can form no idea. It will be easy enough to find Mr. Westwood; but that done, my mission is a delicate one. Unless I receive bad accounts of Miss Courtenay's health it would be wise to wait some weeks before I even hint at the subject to her quondam lover."

Lady Vivian was surprised at her favourite's abrupt departure for Algiers; and yet more so when he begged that her daughter would send him news of the family's movements. But she never dreamed the two rebels, both of whom defied all her match-making efforts on their behalf, could possibly be in love.

She gave a smiling assent to Adam's request, telling him she was sending the girls down to Yorkshire early the following week.

"Dr. Macdonald thinks the country best for Dorothy, or I should have fancied Yorkshire too cold for her. She is a dear little thing; I wish she would grow stronger, and get a little colour in her cheeks."

The old nurse and Lady May could have explained Dolly's weak, languid movements, her thin, pale cheeks; for the scenes of that first night in Park Lane had been repeated more than once.

May, who watched her cousin closely, felt certain she grew weaker. No one but those who loved her approached her, and yet she seemed a prey to nervous terror. Often and often the soft, grey eyes would be fixed on space, as though they saw there some vision hid from other eyes. For the rest, she was a very obedient patient, ate the delicacies brought her by Nurse, took all the physic prescribed by the doctor, sat up when they told her, went out for a drive when so advised. But with it all she did not gain ground, and when, a week after May had brought her away from the Hall, the cousins went down to Vivian Court, the difference even in those seven days was terribly apparent!

"I will run down in a few days," said Dr. Macdonald, as he paid his farewell visit, and followed Lady May into her boudoir, for he usually gave his directions to her, not to the Countess.

"I confess I am very anxious about Miss Courtenay. Is there no one else you would like to consult—no friend, I mean, to whom you could tell your impressions?"

May shook her head.

"My uncle and aunt are infatuated with Miss Desmond."

"But perhaps Miss Courtenay has brothers?"

"Only one likely to be of use, and it would be cruel to tell him our fears, since he is passionately attached to Miss Desmond's younger sister."

"But it does not follow that the second daughter has this wonderful gift. Indeed, I believe I have heard the young ladies had different mothers."

May looked surprised.

"I never dreamed anyone would fancy that. The fact is, my cousin's fiancé, Eileen Desmond, is not at all in favour with her beautiful sister. Even now Basil is uneasy at the idea of leaving her in Maude's power. Just

think what he would feel if we even hinted at our fears."

But within a week of their journey to Vivian Court it occurred to Lady May she need not have been so considerate of Basil's feelings.

She had called once on Eileen and found her out; she had written to her twice and had no reply; when one morning two pieces of news greeted her which well-nigh took away her breath. The one was conveyed in a letter from Lady Constance, calling for congratulations on her eldest son's engagement to that sweet girl Laura Peyton! The other came in homelier fashion from her own maid, who, as she was brushing her mistress's hair, ventured to ask if she knew that Lord Desmond's youngest daughter was dying.

(To be continued next week.)

This story commenced in No. 2,065. Back numbers can be obtained through all News-agents.

Gems

THE man who says he never makes a mistake probably doesn't know one when he sees it.

ONE of the best tonics for the nerves is a long brisk walk. Pure air contains every kind of medicine.

TO a man love-making is the prologue to marriage; but to a woman marriage is the epilogue to making love.

FRIENDS should be weighed, not told; he who boasts of having won a multitude of friends has never had one.

THINK of the ills from which you are exempt, and it will aid you to bear patiently those which you may now suffer.

WHEN temperament will not serve as an excuse, environment will, and with circumstances is sure to cover everything.

WERE we determined resolutely to avoid vices, the world foists them on us—as thieves put off their plunder on the guiltless.

A MAN should fear when he enjoys only what good he does publicly. Is it not the publicity rather than the charity that he loves?

FISHERMEN, in order to handle eels securely, first cover them with dirt. In like manner does detraction strive to grasp excellence.

BEYOND THE VEIL

Why dread the clouds that hide the sun
When poets say that every one
Has got a "silver lining"?

And if the melting god of day
Should shine in one unbroken ray,
We mortals in our thankless way,

Would soon forget his shining.

We need the darkness and the veil,

The sob of anguish and the wail,

To bring out all our brightness!

As, when spring comes, a glorious bride,

And winter's mould is pushed aside,

The clouds but show the difference wide

'Twixt them and daisy's whiteness.

Then let us not rebel and cry

Against the will of the Most High,

But do our simple duty.

Put all our needless fears to rout,

And pierce, by faith, the clouds of doubt,

Then shall the promised sun shine out

In rays of dazzling beauty.

WHERE THEY DON'T "MOTR" OR "BIKE."—Motor-cars as yet show no signs of being much used in Portugal. Last year only twenty were imported, of which eighteen were French, one English, and one German. The bicycle trade is also languishing; only 572 bicycles were imported in twelve months—222 from the United States, 151 from France, and 35 from the United Kingdom. The population of Portugal is about the same as that of London.

Facetiæ

MISSED HER CALLING.—Every time a lady physician calls on a gentleman patient it is unmistakably evident that she's Mr. calling.

A DENTIST'S LITTLE JOKE.—"You see, my dear fellow, that a person who is considered landless has sometimes two or three achers in his mouth."

"ANGELINE," said Dorothea, as she abstractedly fingered the keys of the piano, "what is your favourite air?" "The million heir," Angeline abstractedly replied.

WHEN Jones came in the room unexpectedly Mrs. Jones gave a scream and exclaimed: "You frightened me half to death." "Did I?" was the unfeeling reply. "Suppose I try it over again."

LITTLE GIRL (to a playmate): "We had a wooden wedding at our house last night." The Playmate: "Well, we had a wooden wedding at our house last week. My sister wouldn't marry old Mr. Dorkins."

"My dear boy," said a fond father to his son, "never neglect your work. Work acts like medicine." "Then," exclaimed the son, who had been dosed with drugs, "I don't want any of it; I hate medicine!"

"JOHN," said a wife to her husband, as she looked up from her morning paper, "what is a coastwise steamer?" "A coastwise steamer, my dear? Why a coast wise steamer is one that knows how to keep off the rocks along the coast."

IT OUGHT TO BE POPULAR.—A new comic song is called "The Tomcat is a Funny Old Bird." It is sung to the accompaniment of a shot-gun. If the gun misses the cat and kills the singer, there is no complaint. Everybody is satisfied.

FAME.—A man may acquire fame by writing an epic that will last for ever; but when he dies his funeral will not be half so large and imposing as that of the slogger who knocks another ruffian out in three rounds for the championship.

Two young ladies and an Irish gentleman were conversing on age, when one of them put the home question: "Which of us do you think is the elder, Mr. G—?" "Sure," replied the gallant Hibernian, "you both look younger than each other."

BIRDS OF A FEATHER, ETC.—A woman's journal says that "some of the best men in this country are journalists." And it might have added that some of the best women in this country are the wives of journalists. Good men and good women come high, but we must have them.

HOTEL WAITER: "You are late for lunch, sir." Eminent Physician: "Yes, I had to finish my magazine article on 'The Laws of Health,' so as to get it into the next post. What have you to-day?" "Hot rolls, plum-pudding, apple-dumplings, mince-pies, and fruit-cake." "Bring 'em all."

A CHILD'S WISDOM.—Five-year-old Lucy was much displeased when her mother drowned a couple of kittens. A few days subsequently she was taken into her mother's chamber to see a brand-new brother. "Mamma," said the little girl, with a look of disgust at the noisy new-comer, "don't you think it would have been better to have saved one of the kitties and drowned the baby? The kitty didn't cry all the time."

PRACTISING FOR THE WEDDING.—"What's the reason Charlotte doesn't come to school?" asked the teacher of a little tow-headed boy on Monday morning. "I dunno," replied the boy, as he nearly ruined his hat by pulling it instead of lifting it off his head, "but I expect it's on account of her beau." "Is she going to get married?" "Well, she acts like it. I saw her pull her beau's hair last night, and that's the way ma treats pa. I suppose Cis is practisin' for the weddin'."

IGNORANCE IS BLISTER.—A woman whose husband left her because of her ignorance of culinary matters, is now engaged in writing a "Family Cook Book." It will, no doubt, be a very valuable work, for her husband declares that she cooked but three kinds of food for dinner three months in succession.

IN VINO VERITAS.—Two men, who had taken more than was good for them, were spending an hour over a social glass. "Smith, old man," said one to the other, grasping him by the hand and shaking it warmly, "I've known you for the last twenty years, and we have been very good friends, but I've never liked you."

ONE day some school children were having an object-lesson on the blue heron. The teacher called attention to its small tail, saying: "The bird has no tail to speak of." Next day she asked the class to write a description of the bird, and one little German girl thus concluded her essay: "The blue heron has a tail, but it must not be talked about."

MERCHANT (to collector): "John, are the Slimkinnes going to receive to-day?" Collector: "I saw their card in the paper to that effect." Merchant: "Well, take our bill for September and go up. You haven't been able to get in the last twenty-five or thirty times you called, but you can get there to-day. I tell you, John, society is a great blessing if you only look at it right."

"THREE goes a handsome woman," said Wigwag to McPelter. "Do you know her?" "That's Miss Recherche, and I may hardly say that I know her. However, she called 'Hello!' to me, very familiarly, the other day." "You don't say so? And yet she didn't seem to recognise you just now." "Oh, no! I didn't expect her to. She called to me through the telephone!"

THIS following is related of a popular divine, in conversation with one of his parishioners who was fearfully addicted to profanity and at the same time one of those conceited fellows who are apt to allude to themselves as "plain, blunt men." The latter concluded a speech with this shibboleth, adding, "And I call a spade a spade." The patient dominie responded: "I am glad you do, Mr. B.; I was afraid you would call it a d—d old shovel."

WIFE (returned from church, to her husband who had stayed at home): "You should have heard Dr. Does sermon this morning, my dear. I don't know when anything has made such a profound impression upon me. I think it will make a better woman of me as long as I live." Husband: "Did you walk home?" Wife: "No, I took a tramcar; and do you know, John, the conductor never asked me for my fare, and so I saved twopence! Wasn't I lucky!"

"WHY is it that the attendants in telephone offices are all women?" Mrs. Brown asked her husband. "Well," answered Mr. Brown, "the managers of the telephone offices were aware that no class of attendants work so faithfully as those who are in love with their labour; and they knew that women would be fond of the work in telephone offices." "What is the work in a telephone office?" Mrs. Brown further inquired. "Talking," answered Mr. Brown; and the conversation came to an end.

A RIDICULOUS PLEA.—A man had to pay five pounds for kissing a strange woman at a railway station. He pleaded in extenuation of his crime that he thought the woman was his wife, but the judge was a married man himself, and said such an excuse was too diaphanous. If the defendant had said that he thought the woman was some other man's wife, his honour would have believed him, and let him off with a fine of a shilling, which would have satisfied outraged justice, and the man would have got the worth of his money, and more, too, especially if he threw his arms around the neck of the strange woman when he imprinted the kies.

HIS QUAKER BRIDE

(Concluded from page 419.)

not strange, Val, that he should adhere to such an improbable story in all good faith?"

"Very. I am quite willing to believe that a man of my name was staying at the Hotel d'Angleterre, as he affirms. He may have resembled me more or less, and his conduct was certainly shady; but to identify me with the fellow, and to persist in doing so in the face of evidence to the contrary, is beyond a joke. Such an eccentric individual as Mr. Barclay will be better off amidst his native wilds. We can afford to laugh at him, darling! When do you think Aunt Rachael will let me claim you?"

"Oh, not yet for a long while," said Ruth, with downcast eyes. "She spoke to me this morning about—about our marriage, Val. It must not take place, Aunt Rachael says, until you are duly qualified as a doctor."

"By Jove! why not?"

"Promise not to be angry if I tell you her reason?"

"I couldn't be angry with you if I tried."

"Well, then, Aunt Rachael does not approve of your mode of living. She thinks you are wasting precious time, and contracting idle, expensive habits. She means you to work hard if—if you really wish to make me your wife."

"Does she wish me to join the Society of Friends as well?" inquired Val, gravely.

"You are laughing at me, and that is not kind," said Ruth, with a tinge of wounded love in her voice. "Val, we must understand each other before we go any further. I will never consent to marry a fashionable, useless man of the world."

"I won't ask you to do so," he replied, drawing her towards him fondly and proudly, feeling as he gazed into the lucid depths of her soft grey eyes that it behoved him to do his utmost in return for the priceless treasure of her love. "I will try to render myself worthy of you, my darling. I will put my shoulder to the wheel and make the best use of any talent I possess. At that rate, it won't be long before I have fulfilled Aunt Rachel's conditions, and won my wife."

She gave him a glance full of trust and gratitude.

"I am sure you can do great things if you try."

"I shall endeavour to realise your expectations, any way. Of course, while I am on probation, as it were, I may come to Penwyr as often as I can spare the time?"

"Yes, oh, yes! Penwyr will seem a different place when you are there," said the girl, gladly. "I little thought when I came to London what a great bewildering happiness was in store for me."

"Say for us both. Ruth, we really have a lot to thank Algy Cavendish for. There isn't a better little fellow going. But for him I might not have succeeded in winning Mr. Ephraim Barclay, and regaining Aunt Rachael's confidence."

"I am very, very grateful to him. He is coming here this afternoon. Aunt Rachael invited him. In her quiet way she is just as pleased to know that you have such a friend. Oh, and Marie Benquier is coming to tea as well. I have not told you about her, poor thing."

"Who is she?"

"Ruth acquainted him with the young Frenchwoman's history, in so far as she knew it herself."

"She has nearly a dozen pupils already, and Aunt Rachael is very kind to her. She often spends the evening with us. Is it not sad for her to be in such uncertainty with regard to her husband's fate?"

"Very, if her story is a true one. You cannot be too careful as to the people with whom

you form acquaintance in London, Ruth. Impostors abound, and—"

"Oh, I am quite sure that poor Marie is a lady, that she has told us the simple truth about herself," said Ruth, earnestly. "You will see her presently, and be able to form your own opinion. I hope so much, if he is alive, that she will succeed in finding her husband."

Aunt Rachael and the tea-tray came in together at this moment, and Algy Cavendish's subsequent arrival brought the tête-à-tête to an end.

Algy was languidly discussing the merits of a new book with the old Quakeress. Val was helping or hindering Ruth in her task of pouring out tea when the door opened softly, and Marie Benquier entered.

The Frenchwoman looked strikingly handsome in her sombre black dress, enlivened here and there by a vivid gleam of maize-colour. As her flashing dark eyes travelled swiftly round the room, noting each occupant, they rested at length upon Val Curzon.

Ruth, turning to greet her with a smile, saw Marie's great mournful eyes dilated to their fullest extent, while her face was working convulsively as she strove to speak.

"Why, Marie!" she began, in alarm.

"What—"

She stopped abruptly as the Frenchwoman, with a wild sobbing cry, darted suddenly forward and flung her arms round Val Curzon's neck.

"My husband! oh, my husband! I have found you at last!" she exclaimed, brokenly, in mingled accents of love and upbraiding. "What had I done that you should desert me so cruelly?"

Recovering from his momentary astonishment, Val freed himself from her embrace, and regarded the others inquiringly.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, angrily. "Is she mad? I have never seen her before. She is a perfect stranger to me."

"It is false!" cried Marie Benquier, turning upon him with true foreign passion. "Monster of meanness, will you actually dare to disown me—your wife—whom you deserted two years ago in Paris? That ever I should have loved a man so worthless, so contemptible! Why did you marry me if you cared so little for me? Before all present, I declare you to be my husband, Valentine Curzon."

"Paris again!" ejaculated Val, with a groan. "There is a regular conspiracy against me in that direction! Ruth, Algy, Aunt Rachael, I am willing to swear that this lady is not my wife, that I know nothing of her."

Algy looked grave. Even his faith in Val had suffered a severe shock. He knew not what to think.

Aunt Rachael was leaning over Ruth, who had sunk down upon the sofa, her face hidden in her trembling hands.

"He lies!" retorted Marie Benquier; her dark eyes flashing fire, her love converted into sudden hatred. "Were we not married at the Church of St. Sulpice? Did we not live together on the outskirts of Paris for six months in the villa that you had hired, miserable? Yet you have forgotten it all, you refuse to recognise me! Oh, it is too much. I wonder that I do not kill you where you stand."

"I can only repeat what I have already said," rejoined Val, doggedly. "Good heaven, can my double be going about the world somewhere, bringing all this misery upon me? I can account for it in no other way. Madam, you are either an adventuress or the victim of a mistake. Once for all, I swear that you are not my wife, that I have never seen you until to-day."

Then Aunt Rachael raised herself and spoke.

"Nephew, leave us at once," she said, sternly. "I will listen to no vindication. Ephraim Barclay was right when he warned

us against you. Go, and never dare to return."

"Ruth, you at least believe in me still," cried the young fellow, wildly. "You will not condemn me unheard?"

But Ruth made no reply. Marie Benquier's claim upon Val had broken her faith in him, and well-nigh broken her heart also.

CHAPTER IX.

Ephraim Barclay was in the midst of his packing when the subjoined note reached him from Rachael Hargrave:—

"DEAR FRIEND,—Kindly forget my reproachful words of this morning. I have, alas! every reason to believe in the truthfulness of the accusation brought against my nephew. Something has transpired to rob me of all confidence in him. Ruth is ill, poor child, and I desire to return at once to Penwyr. Come to us at once, for we stand sadly in need of the firm friendship that I regret should ever have been interrupted by one so unworthy as Valentine Curzon."

Astonished, hopeful, at a loss to think what could have happened in so short a time to occasion such a radical change of opinion, Ephraim rushed into his hat and coat, and drove to Verney-street without losing a moment.

Ruth was not visible when he got there.

Aunt Rachael informed him of what had occurred, her fine old face expressive of stern sorrow and regret.

She believed Val to be guilty now of all that had been brought against him. Her heart was full of just indignation, that he should have dared to make love to Ruth, being, as Marie Benquier confidently alleged, a married man.

She did not accuse Algy Cavendish of any attempt to deceive her. Algy had evidently been deceived himself. Had he not gone away without saying a word in his friend's favour, after witnessing that disgraceful scene?

If Ruth recovered from the shock of such a bitter awakening, never would she, Rachael Hargrave, tempt fate by bringing her to London again.

"My niece is quite prostrate," said the old lady, sadly. "I should like to get her home at once. She cannot bear Marie Benquier—I should say Mrs. Curzon—to go near her. Yet she is not to be blamed. All this misery has been wrought by her husband, as she persists in calling him. She has even shown me her marriage certificate; she could not possibly have forged that! And it is Miriam's son—my favourite nephew—who has acted thus!"

"What can I do to hasten thy departure?" asked Ephraim, pitying her distress, yet in no wise sorry to hear that Val Curzon had met his Nemesis in the shape of an angry, deserted wife.

Ephraim, after the snubbing and loss he had undergone, would have been more or less than human had he experienced no pleasure in the downfall of his rival, and the vindication of his own honour, with regard to the truthfulness of the Parisian story.

Now, perhaps, these foolish women would see and recognise that honest truth was more valuable and lasting than the showy surface qualities of a man like Val Curzon.

Aunt Rachael gave him a few commissions, and seemed greatly relieved when he promised to take her and Ruth home to Penwyr by the first train on the following morning.

Ephraim Barclay went away, building castles in the air, from the windows of which Ruth's sweet face looked out and smiled upon him. He would win her yet. That scoundrel, Val Curzon, had only come between them for awhile. Ere six months had passed, Ruth, he told himself, in sober gladness, would have become Mrs. Barclay.

Aunt Rachael stayed up later than usual to finish her packing. She could not persuade Ruth to rouse herself from the stupor into

which she had fallen. The girl seemed heart-broken, incapable of any exertion.

All her love and trust had been slain at one blow. She dared not think of Val save with feelings of bitterest reproach and indignation.

How could he have insulted her thus shamefully, winning the pure gold of her love, and giving her only tinsel in return? Oh! if death would but come to her relief and mercifully deliver her from the blank dreary future that she feared to contemplate.

The vacant look in her eyes made Aunt Rachael nervous. She trembled for the girl's mind. When Ephraim Barclay droyed up in the cab that was to carry them to the station the sight of his honest, good-natured face reassured the old Quakeress a little. She felt that she was not left alone in her trouble.

"Good-bye, my dear!" she said, gently, to Marie Benquier, who had passed her fit of passionate weeping. "I do not blame you for what has occurred. Write to me every day and let me know if my nephew has at least had the grace to acknowledge you as his wife. There is no reason now why he should refuse to do so. He cannot possibly undergo a more complete exposure!"

"I will never live with him again—never!" protested the Frenchwoman, vehemently. "He has caused me too much misery, and you also, chere madame!"

Meanwhile, the leading villain in this little domestic drama was as miserably perplexed and bewildered as his worst enemy could have wished him to be.

That some connecting link existed between Ephraim Barclay's accusation and Marie Benquier's strange conduct in claiming him as her husband, felt certain.

Was there some vile conspiracy against him, the young man wondered, in fierce, impotent anger? Had he an enemy who was succeeding only too well in blackening his character, and estranging all his friends from him?

If so, Ephraim Barclay was not the man. He had accused him in good faith, believing firmly in his own story.

There was no collusion between the Quaker and Marie Benquier. Each had acted independently of the other in bringing such serious charges against him.

"Even Algy has thrown me over," thought Val, miserably. "That confounded Frenchwoman's story proved too much for him. He has lost all confidence in me; he is ready to suspect the worst. And Ruth, what will she not suffer in mind, my poor darling, until I can unravel this mystery that has wound itself round me! In her opinion I must be the basest villain unhung. If I suffer my thoughts to dwell upon her I shall go mad! To have such exquisite happiness snatched away from me for the second time! Shall I ever succeed in discovering the man who has wrought me so much harm? I must; life would become unendurable passed under such a cruel stigma, apart from Ruth! Yet how to set about establishing my innocence, I know not, since my double—whoever he may be—works in the dark. I have no clue to him!"

Jack and Miggs could gain no answering word or look from their master when they came about him as usual, expecting to be noticed.

Dejected and unhappy, Val sat in his easy-chair, smoking endless cigars, and thinking deeply.

Algy Cavendish did not come near him. This wounded Val deeply. It was tantamount to an expression of belief in his guilt. Surely Algy might have known him better than to credit the Frenchwoman's assertion!

"Does he deem me guilty upon both charges, I wonder?" mused Val. "In for a penny in for a pound. He evidently believes that black-eyed tartar to be my wife. I'm awfully thankful that she's nothing of the kind. I may be an idiot in some respects, but I could never lose my head sufficiently to marry such

a woman, a tragic muse, capable of great things in the vituperative line. How she turned upon me when I declared her statement to be either a mistake or a falsehood! And my name—she'd got it so pat! I wonder—why, what a fool I must be not to have thought of that before!"

Springing to his feet as a fresh idea occurred to him, Val Curzon paced excitedly up and down the room, the dogs watching him gravely, as if they more than half doubted their master's sanity.

"Foregone conclusions are a mistake," he muttered, presently, pausing in his rapid walk, and turning over some old letters that had lain undisturbed in his desk for years. "His fate was uncertain, admitting of boundless conjecture; and then the likeness, the close resemblance, how is that to be explained? Such things have happened, and my surmise is the only one that throws any light upon the mystery!"

"Should it prove incorrect, I shall once more be at a dead standstill. At any rate, it is worth acting upon. Now to think of the means of snaring my bird, supposing him to exist. I must be cautious, lest I alarm him, and thus ruin my last chance of clearing my name from all aspersion. Thank Heaven for sending me the idea, although it has come late in the day. It involves immediate action, and, failing that, I should be sadly in need of a strait waistcoat."

At the risk of compromising himself to a greater extent by treating her claim upon him seriously, Val Curzon went to Verney Street and had an interview with Marie Benquier, his self-dubbed wife.

Marie's mood was at first stormy, but it gradually calmed down as she listened to what Val had to say.

In return she supplied him with some valuable information. When Val left her he was in a far more hopeful frame of mind.

Resisting a strong impulse to call upon Algy Cavendish, Val told the cabman to drive to the office of his solicitors, Messrs. Greymarsh and Dibble.

"I won't go near the little beggar till I have placed myself beyond suspicion," he resolved, defiantly. "Then it will be my turn to sport the cold shoulder."

Val's interview with Mr. Greymarsh, the senior partner, was a long one. At parting the solicitor shook hands with the young man warmly.

"It is a wretched position for you to be placed in," he remarked condolingly; "and one quite unprecedented, so far as my experience goes. Never mind, have patience, and we shall lay the rod on the right shoulders yet, and clear you from every imputation. You will remain in town for the next month or so, that we may be able to communicate with you, should occasion arise, at once."

Val went home and forwarded a carefully-worded advertisement, drawn up by Mr. Greymarsh and himself, to each of the principal English, French, and American daily papers, said advertisement to be repeated for an indefinite period, should it fail at once to produce any result.

Having done all that was in his power, Val Curzon waited like a spider within his web, waiting for the arrival of the unwary fly, only without the spider's patience.

It was well-nigh maddening to think of Ruth far away at Penwy, not radiant with love and happiness as he had seen her, but pale and drooping, silently reproaching him as the cause of all her misery.

Aunt Rachael and Ephraim Barclay would doubtless paint him in the darkest colours as a worthless, dishonourable adventurer, who had won her love only to play with it, and then cast it from him like a broken toy.

And Ruth would believe them! How could she do otherwise? Marie Benquier's declaration had proved too much for Ruth's faith, strong as it had been. Since another woman

had claimed Val as her husband, how could she, a pure, innocent girl, continue to repose trust and confidence in him?

The advertisement was duly inserted, yet it failed to evoke any reply. Some time after Val waited at the office of Greymarsh and Dibble, only to be told that they had no good news for him.

"What can I do if the advertisement proves a dead failure?" asked Val, impatiently, of Mr. Greymarsh.

"I really don't know. You see, the affair is of such an exceptional nature that it admits of no ordinary measures," was the unsatisfactory reply. "We may, for aught we can tell, be advertising for a dead man! In that case, our policy—pardon the joke—must indeed be regarded as a dead failure. Still, we must persevere for the present. I certainly shall not despair of gaining a reply for the next three weeks at least. It will be time enough then, failing any result, to decide what fresh action we can take in the matter."

All very well for old Greymarsh to preach patience; he was not in love. Val went moodily away, half inclined to run down to Penwy, and see Ruth at any cost.

"She would only turn away from me, though," he reflected, miserably; "and that would be more than I could stand! Poor little Ruth! I wonder how she bears it? I hope that fellow Barclay isn't boring her with his hateful attentions. It's comforting to know that she will never accept him under any circumstances. Yet he can see her every day if he likes, while I, through no fault of my own, am practically banished as a black sheep and a Pariah. Oh! I can't endure this sort of thing much longer. I'll go to Paris and conduct my own investigations. I'll find the fellow whose shortcomings have been accredited to me if he is above ground, and make him suffer for it. By Jove, I'll make him smart when I do come across him, or my name isn't Val Curzon!"

CHAPTER X.

If one of Algy Cavendish's diplomatic ventures had proved a failure, the other promised to reward him amply for all the trouble he had taken. His investigations with regard to Mrs. Whycherley would, when revealed, effectually prevent Colonel FitzMarkham from making her his wife—at least, so Algy firmly believed.

This being the case, Aurelia's gratitude might safely be reckoned upon. She would necessarily entertain a high opinion of Algy's skill and keenness which had enabled him to discover and lay bare the charming widow's carefully-concealed family skeleton.

But for the hope of inducing Aurelia to accept him as a lover, and to regard his advances with more favour than she did those of other men, Algy would not have troubled himself in the matter. Apart from Aurelia, the Colonel might have fallen a victim to Mrs. Whycherley, or any other middle-aged syren, for all that Algy cared.

His object in preserving that gallant old warrior from matrimonial toils was that he might induce Aurelia to become entangled in them herself—a very difficult and delicate task.

Algy was feeling annoyed and disappointed with Val Curzon's complicated position.

His success in the Whycherley affair hardly compensated him for the loss of faith in his old friend that had ensued upon Marie Benquier's declaration, and the part he had been induced to play as mediator, while in the belief that Val was a cruelly calumniated man.

Inclined to think that Marie Benquier was really Val's wife, Algy knew not where to stop when judging his quondam friend.

A man who could keep his marriage a secret, and subsequently desert his wife, might be capable of doing anything else that was mean and dishonourable.

Algy regretted his eloquent pleading in Val's behalf, since it was by no means unlikely that

he had really fought the duel, and circulated the false notes, as stated by Ephraim Barclay. That he should have warmly defended such a scoundrel annoyed the little man beyond measure. Val's prolonged absence, his complete silence, served to strengthen Algy's worst suspicions concerning him.

If he were innocent, would he not come boldly forward and give the lie to his accusers? Metaphorically, Algy Cavendish washed his hands of Val, not without a feeling of keen regret that he should have proved so unworthy.

He went to Curzon Street one morning when his plan was ripe for action, to call upon Colonel and Miss Fitz-Markham. Fortune favoured him, for the Colonel—of whom he was especially in quest—happened to be at home.

"I hardly know what to do with myself to-day!" he remarked, incontinently, as he rose to go. "So many fellows have left town that the usual haunts seem quite deserted. I should like to run down to Brighton if I'd only got a companion. Colonel, won't you take pity on me, and say you'll go?"

"I don't mind if I do," replied that gentleman, always ready for anything in the shape of an outing. Besides, there was something flattering to his vanity in Algy's request.

He could not be such a desperate old fogey since a young fellow like Algy Cavendish was desirous of his society.

The Colonel's boyish mercurial temperament rose at the idea of a delightful day and a nice little dinner at a fashionable hotel—a dinner at which Aurelia would not be present. He got himself ready to accompany Algy with alacrity.

"What frivolous beings you men are!" said Aurelia, calmly, as she went on making up some club accounts during her father's temporary absence from the room. "You think of nothing but your own pleasure!"

"We are a frivolous set, I admit!" replied Algy. "The real business of life is, of course, managed by women. I have a reason, though, for asking the Colonel to go to Brighton with me to-day!"

Aurelia looked up quickly.

"Is your reason in any way connected with Mrs. Whycherley?" she asked.

"Yes! it bears directly upon her!"

"But she is not at Brighton," said Aurelia. "She is in South Wales. Papa has actually received letters from her. His infatuation is on the increase, I am sorry to say."

"Do you know if he has actually promised to marry her?" inquired Algy, anxiously.

"No, I don't think it has gone quite so far, although it very soon will!"

"To-day's experience may induce the Colonel to beat a retreat and remain a widower," said Algy, confidently. "You will pardon me for not satisfying your curiosity more completely now. To-morrow I promise to tell you everything, and I do not think you will blame me for what I have done."

"I will stay at home to-morrow morning, then, until you call!" said Aurelia, graciously. "You are putting my patience to a cruel test, Mr. Cavendish; but I have every confidence in you. What you propose doing at Brighton, though," she continued, wondering, "I can't imagine!"

The Colonel was in high spirits when they reached that popular watering-place. Algy immediately struck out for the Parade as if he meant business.

"Now we are here we may as well call upon Mrs. Whycherley, Colonel," he said, airily. "Charming woman, Mrs. Whycherley; very fortunate in her family connections, which are, to say the least of them, extensive."

The Colonel looked bewildered.

"Mrs. Whycherley is in South Wales at the present moment with a party of friends," he replied, quickly. "I believe that her family connections are quite satisfactory, quite!"

"Oh, of course! But with regard to Mrs. Whycherley's present whereabouts you have been misinformed, Colonel. She is lodging at a house on the Parade, and she's sure to ask us to stay to luncheon. Come along."

"It's very strange; very strange, indeed!" muttered the Colonel, uneasily. "I could have sworn that she was in South Wales. Do you know how long she has been here, Mr. Cavendish?"

"About a fortnight, I believe," said Algy, carelessly, thereby increasing the Colonel's bewilderment.

Mrs. Whycherley had left town only a fortnight ago. Therefore, if Algy Cavendish were to be relied upon, she had not been to South Wales at all. And yet those letters? Surely such a charming woman had not been guilty of falsehood and deceit!

"This is the house," said Algy, in his cool, collected way. "Mrs. Whycherley at luncheon!" he continued, in answer to the servant's information. "Never mind, take our cards in; she will not refuse to see us."

Following close upon the servant's heels to render escape or excuse impossible, Algy entered a dingy, close-smelling, back-parlour, followed by the wondering and uneasy Colonel.

Awful and unexpected sight to meet the eyes of an ardent, elderly lover! There, at the head of a long table sat Mrs. Whycherley, his goddess, whom he had fondly imagined to be without encumbrances of any kind, dispensing boiled mutton and rice pudding to no less than nine olive branches—four boys and five girls—healthy, hearty youngsters, who bore a strong resemblance to their mother!

Mrs. Whycherley uttered a little scream as her visitors entered the room, and sank back in her chair. Algy was quite equal to the occasion. The Colonel merely steadied himself against the wall and gasped.

"How do, Mrs. Whycherley?" said Algy,

with languid grace, enjoying the scene immensely. "Awfully sorry to disturb you at luncheon, but having run down from town for the day Colonel Fitz-Markham and I couldn't possibly resist the temptation of calling upon you."

By this time Mrs. Whycherley had recovered her self-possession. She could not deny her family, since the boys and girls were all sitting round, intently listening. She could not prevent the Colonel from detecting the deceit of which she had been guilty in concealing their existence from him. It only remained to wear a bold front, and look the unpleasant situation fairly in the face.

"Delighted to see you!" she replied, with rather a ghastly smile. "These are my boys and girls—all home for the holidays. May I ask you to share our simple meal?"

"You are very kind, but we have already lunched," rejoined the Colonel, stiffly, telling a deliberate fib, and glaring at the assembled youngsters as if they were responsible for their mother's shortcomings. "I was not aware, Mrs. Whycherley, that you had such a large family?"

"Did I never tell you their exact number?" said the widow, sweetly, as her hope of one day becoming Mrs. Fitz-Markham vanished into thin air.

"No, by Jove! no. I can't remember so much as an allusion to them," retorted the angry Colonel. "I—I was given to understand that you were in South Wales?"

"I was there," corrected Mrs. Whycherley; "but I came back to Brighton to be with the children during their holidays, poor darlings."

The Colonel granted; he knew her statement to be a false one. To tell the truth, Mrs. Whycherley had never been farther than Brighton. Her letters had been forwarded to a friend in South Wales to give credence to her story—hence the postmark.

Headache

MRS. E. FAIL, a miner's wife, of Grave's Row, Dudley, interviewed by a "Shields Morning Mail" reporter, said: "Some ten or fifteen

years ago I began to be troubled with sick headaches. At first they only came on occasionally, but gradually they got worse, until I had an attack of biliousness nearly every day. The headaches were accompanied by giddiness and a bad taste in the mouth. These attacks naturally interfered with my household duties, for on many days I had to lie in bed all day. Many a morning when I got up and made some tea, I could not bear the sight of it. It looked just like gall. One evening I saw an advertisement in the papers speaking about the good Charles Forde's Bile Beans for bilious people, and I determined to send for a box. When they came I took a dose at night before retiring. The next morning I felt a great deal better. I continued taking them, and the effect has been wonderful. I have never had a sick headache since I began to take Bile Beans, and I felt better in general health altogether."



SHE COULD NOT RESIST THE SUGGESTION OF TRYING.

Bile Beans for Biliousness are a certain cure for headache, influenza, constipation, piles, liver trouble, bad breath, rheumatism, colds, liver chill, indigestion, flatulence, dizziness, buzzing in the head, debility, anaemia, and all female ailments. Of all chemists, or post free from the Bile Bean Manufacturing Company, Red Cross Street, London, E.C., on receipt of prices, 1s. 1½d. and 2s. 9d. per box.

**BILE
&
BEANS
FOR
BILIOUSNESS**

**HALF-A-GUINEA'S WORTH
FOR 6d.**

The "BILOSCOPE" and outfit (an advertising novelty), for producing lifelike pictures. Post free on receipt of 7 stamps. Address the Bile Bean Manufacturing Company, Box 426, Greek Street, Leeds.

"How nice for you to have them all with you!" said Algy, quietly.

Mrs. Whycherley turned upon him, with fierce resentment shining in her eyes.

She had noticed Algy's devotion to Aurelia FitzMarkham, and—aware of Aurelia's dislike for her—she came rapidly to the conclusion that Algy had been instrumental in bringing the Colonel down upon her and ruining her chance of becoming Mrs. FitzMarkham.

"How did you know that I was here?" she asked, icily, striving hard to keep her temper and hide the mortification she felt.

"Oh! a friend of mine told me!" said Algy, "and of course the Colonel insisted upon calling. You know how determined he is, Mrs. Whycherley, but very pleasant withal. Your children are taking to him already!"

They were certainly taking liberties which the Colonel did not seem much to relish.

Master Jim wanted to examine his watch, while Miss Mary trod upon his toes in her infantile attempt to gain a kiss.

"Little monsters!" snorted the Colonel, on making his escape from the family-party. "That such a charming woman could be so deceitful, Cavendish! I assure you that she never once mentioned those brats to me, and—and I might have married her but for this revelation. It is positively awful! I can never thank you enough for exposing her duplicity in time to save me from such a fate!"

Meanwhile "the charming woman" was in strong hysterics, consequent upon the cruel disappointment and mortification she had undergone.

"They are very nice children, Colonel!" said Algy, persuasively. "They would improve upon acquaintance, you know, and surely Mrs. Whycherley might reconcile you to her family?"

The Colonel glanced askance at his companion, half-inclined to resent his remark, but Algy's gravity prevented an explosion.

Algy was an agreeable companion, and the little dinner at the hotel was exquisitely served, yet somehow the Colonel failed to enjoy himself as he had contemplated doing.

He went straight to his club on their return to town; while Algy, with a consciousness of work well done, put in an appearance at a ball, going home at cock-crow in a jubilant, well-satisfied frame of mind.

Aurelia laughed till the tears stood in her bright eyes as Algy gravely related the Brighton incident to her the next morning.

"Nine children!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I can afford to pity poor Mrs. Whycherley now. I shall never hate her again. What a dreadful exposé. I knew that something very serious had happened; papa came home in such a meek, crestfallen mood. He did not say anything to me, but I drew my own conclusions. I cannot thank you sufficiently for what you have done, Mr. Cavendish. But for you he would have married that dreadful woman and all her children."

"If you are unable to thank me sufficiently I'll take what it is in your power to offer, like a generous creditor," said Algy, boldly.

"What do you mean?" asked Aurelia, laughing and blushing.

"I mean that I am perfectly willing to take you," he continued; "that you are the only woman in the world, so far as I am concerned, Aurelia. I shall certainly never ask any other woman to marry me."

"It would be setting papa such a bad example," objected Aurelia, not very strenuously. "And—and I said I never would renounce my freedom in order to get married. I am wedded to the cause—the emancipation of woman."

"Well, if I promise to adopt the cause, and do all in my power to promote its interests, you would not be breaking your word in becoming my wife, since I should then be part and parcel of it," urged Algy. "And, pardon

me for saying so, but you are much too attractive and brilliant a woman to live and die an old maid, Aurelia."

"You ought to have been a Jesuit," she retorted. "I never heard such casuistry before."

"If it's all the same, I would rather not be a Jesuit, since they are not allowed to get married. Seriously, Aurelia, do you care just a little for me?"

"No."

"Then you're—"

"I care a great deal for you," she interrupted, in a gentler tone. "No one else would have succeeded in persuading me to prove false to my principles. If only papa—"

"He requires more than one person to take care of him, darling," said Algy, kissing her fondly. "You must let me share your task. Between us we shall be able to keep that gay Lothario, your father, in order."

When Colonel FitzMarkham was requested to give his sanction to their engagement—which he did very readily—he came to the conclusion that things were never so bad but that they might have been worse.

If Mrs. Whycherley was for ever lost to him he had at least got rid of Aurelia, his clever managing daughter, under whose iron rule he had so often winced. Algy Cavendish would have to bear with her in the future.

After long waiting, Val Curzon was about to meet with his reward.

A note from Mr. Greymarsh reached him one morning, just as he was about to leave town in impatient despair.

"Come round to the office at once, and bring the lady with you," ran the note. "We are on the eve of a complete explanation. The individual advertised for is here. I need hardly tell you to waste no time."

Val dashed away to Verney Street, swept Marie Benquier—who was prepared for such a contingency—into a hansom after a few

hurried words had passed between them, and then directed the man to drive to Greymarsh and Dibble's office.

The Frenchwoman's eyes glittered like stars with excitement. Val, pale and quiet, but equally excited, sat beside her, nervously tugging at his moustache.

Neither of them vouchsafed any remark during the short, rapid ride. It was a relief to arrive at the office, where they were at once shown into Mr. Greymarsh's private room.

CHAPTER XI.

As Val Curzon entered the room with Marie Benquier leaning on his arm, his attention was immediately arrested by the well-dressed man with whom Mr. Greymarsh was conversing.

The stranger might have been Val's double, they resembled each other so closely in height, bearing, and feature. A more searching scrutiny, however, revealed certain subtle distinctions, not apparent at first sight.

The stranger's face wore a blasé, dissipated, evil expression, from which Val's was free. There were crows' feet under his eyes, and a cynical smile seemed to play constantly upon his lips.

He evinced as much astonishment as Val when the latter confronted him, accompanied by Marie Benquier. He turned angrily to Mr. Greymarsh for an explanation.

"Who is that?" he demanded, pointing to Val, and glancing dubiously at Marie. "You have inveigled me here under a false pretence, sir, a statement that I should hear something to my advantage by responding to your confounded advertisement. You have set a trap for me!"

"Hardly that," responded the lawyer, dryly. "The 'something to your advantage' referred to meant the bringing of your wife, whom you lost sight of more than two years ago, under your notice again, a proceeding that cannot

Keep the Blood Pure

By Taking

FRAZER'S TABLETS.

IF YOU TAKE

FRAZER'S TABLETS

You derive the greatest possible benefit in health and strength. Your blood is made rich and full of vitality, and in consequence the body becomes healthy and strong.

THOUSANDS CAN PROVE

The beneficial properties of FRAZER'S TABLETS

**Eczema, Rheumatism, Constipation,
and all Blood and Skin Disorders.**

PHYSICIANS RECOMMEND THEM EXTENSIVELY.

Frazer's Tablets can be obtained of all Chemists in pale green boxes, with the words **FRAZER'S TABLETS** in GOLD LETTERS on the lid, Price 1s. 3d. per box, or post free 1s. 3d. from

FRAZER'S TABLETS, LTD.,
95, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.

fail to afford you much pleasure. The lady is here, accompanied by her brother-in-law, Mr. John Valentine Curzon."

"Val, my brother!" ejaculated Marie's husband. "The likeness between us is sufficient to prove that. This is an odd meeting," he continued, holding out his hand to Val, who did not take it. "Methinks you are my glass, and not my brother. How on earth did you become acquainted with my wife? Marie, you must forgive me for having left you so abruptly, *ma belle*. I should not have done so had circumstances been more in my favour at the time."

But in spite of his jaunty manner he was evidently ill at ease. Val regarded him in silent scorn; his wife shook him off with a superb gesture of disdain as he attempted to embrace her.

"Do not touch me!" she cried, fiercely. "I wish that I had died before ever you came to ruin my life, to rob me of all love and faith! Forgive me," she continued, earnestly, to Val, "for the pain and loss my mistake has entailed upon you. I will do my utmost to atone for it. I certainly shall not spare or screen him!"

"What do you mean?" asked her husband. "You haven't been claiming my brother as your own peculiar property in mistake for me, have you, Marie?"

"Explain," said Marie, turning away. "I cannot—will not speak to him. He has cost me too much in suffering already!"

"I have not only been accused of the wife desertion for which you alone are responsible," said Val, sternly. "Your disgraceful and criminal doings in Paris have also been laid to my charge, through the similarity of name and feature existing between us. I have lost the confidence of valued friends—thanks to you—my engagement has been broken off, my plans upset. You can expect to receive no forbearance at my hands. I mean to vindicate my own good name at any cost. I intend you to clear me from all the aspersions to which your misconduct has given rise."

Val briefly explained the various annoyances and losses he had sustained, and the charges brought against him. His brother listened sullenly.

"I was not to know that they would make you the scapegoat for all my offences," he said, in self-defence. "I'm sorry that it should have been so—honestly sorry. Until this morning I was unaware that such a strong personal resemblance existed between us, and the folly of naming us both Valentine has doubtless helped to produce the mistake. Many a time I have been on the point of coming to England to see you, but something always happened to frustrate the intention. What gave you the impression that I was still living? The report reached home that I had been scalped by Mexican Indians."

"I remembered that it was only a report," said Val, coldly, "and that your reputation had never stood very high. Then I requested your wife to let me examine her certificate of marriage. It proved her to have married Frederick Valentine Curzon, not John Valentine Curzon. Then I felt certain that you were the author of all my troubles, and I determined to find you."

"And now that you have found me, what do you want me to do?"

"You must clear me fully and completely in the eyes of my friends by acknowledging this lady as your wife, and admitting that you alone were involved in the various disreputable acts wrongly attributed to me."

"And if I refuse to do this?"

"I shall take public proceedings against you. I mean to establish my own character as a man of honour, irrespective of the result to you. Any demur on your part to accede to my request—a very reasonable one under the circumstances—will land you in prison on a charge of wife desertion."

"Really it is quite what you might expect from a brother!" said Frederick Curzon, with a cynical air. "If you can assure me that a confession made in private, in which I admit

my own liability with regard to Marie, and those other little affairs connected with Paris in which I once figured, shall be kept strictly a secret from the outer world, I don't mind making it. But I must first have your word that my self-inculpation will lead to no unpleasant consequences, that after I have cleared you I shall be at liberty to quit England immediately."

"I can afford to avail myself of your evidence upon these terms," said Val, after a moment's thought. "You will be free to go where you like, so far as I am concerned, when once you have declared me innocent of any participation in your wrongdoings, when you have explained away the mistake that has arisen. Stay, though, there is your wife to be considered. I shall insist upon your making adequate provision for her before you disappear again."

"I will accept nothing—nothing!" interposed Marie, proudly. "I would sooner starve than be dependent upon the man whose name I bear."

Frederick Curzon shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear Marie," he replied, coolly, "your resolution does you credit, and considering that my finances are at a very low ebb, that I am not in a position to support myself, much less a wife, you could hardly have decided better. I should not have left you but for the disagreeable fact that I had arrived at my last pound."

"Our uncle in New York has cast you off, then?" said Val, interrogatively. "He refuses to do any more for you?"

"Precisely. He sent me adrift previous to that Mexican expedition, when I narrowly escaped being scalped by the Indians. He is a narrow-minded man, averse to youthful follies. I shall never inherit the piles of shining dollars that he has scraped together in the course of twenty years."

"You appear to have gone to work to ruin all your prospects in life in the most business-

like manner possible," observed Val, dryly; as he penned a note to Algy Cavendish. "I must request you to remain here until the friend to whom I am now writing arrives. Then you will have to accompany me to Penwyr, in Cornwall, after which I shall have no further need of your services. Mrs. Curzon will, I know, consent to go with us."

"Yes. I will go," said Marie, promptly. "I owe this to you, and a great deal besides. I have unconsciously wrought you so much harm, but it is not yet too late to undo it. To accomplish this I will consent for once to endure my husband's society. Immediately I leave Penwyr, however, we shall become as strangers to each other for ever. I never wish to meet him again in this world."

Val's note to his friend ran as follows:—

"DEAR ALGY,—

"Oblige me by coming at once to Grey-march and Dibble's office, where I await you. I am—thank Heaven—in a position to explain everything. I think you will find that you owe me an apology."

"VAL."

In less than half-an-hour Algy Cavendish was at the office. It did not take long to place him in possession of all the facts that had transpired. Frederick Curzon admitting his own liability and confessing to the dishonourable deeds that had been fathered upon Val, in a manner that was half sullen, half defiant.

Val got his apology from Algy, and a very genuine one it was.

The little man deeply regretted the moment when he had been induced to thank Val guiltily. He expressed his warm desire to accompany the others to Cornwall for the purpose of assuring Aunt Rachael, in person, of his renewed trust and confidence in her nephew's unblemished honour!

Val willingly consented.

It was a strange little party that went down to Cornwall the next day, Frederick Curzon having been kept well under his brother's eye

A Wonderful Healer.—For Chilblains and Chapped Hands.

CALVERT'S CARBOLIC OINTMENT

Combines with the properties of an ordinary Ointment, the powerful antiseptic and healing virtues of Carbolic Acid.

A valuable remedy for Burns, Bruises, Cuts, Scalds, Earache, Throat Colds, Piles and Skin Ailments generally.

It allays irritation and stimulates a healthy action of the skin.

13d. per pot, at Chemists, Grocers, Stores, &c.

F. C. CALVERT & Co., Manchester.

in the meanwhile, lest he should attempt to escape.

A painful feeling of constraint oppressed each member of the party. The situation was not one calculated to set any of them at ease.

Marie scarcely uttered a word as she sat opposite to the husband whom she despised and disliked. Val was absorbed in thoughts of Ruth, while Frederick Curzon's meditations could hardly have been of a pleasant nature, considering that he was there under pressure, about to be branded as the black sheep of the family.

It was on a glorious autumn afternoon that they reached picturesque, sleepy little Penwyr. Bathed in mellow, golden sunshine, it looked quaint, old-world, and peaceful as a poet's dream.

When the cab containing the odd quartet drew up in front of Aunt Rachael's pretty, rose-covered cottage, she was talking earnestly with Ephraim Barclay in the front parlour.

Ruth's sinking health was the theme of conversation. From the time of her return from London she had never rallied, never recovered her previous good spirits and gentle energy. She seemed to be slipping away from them by imperceptible degrees, growing weaker and more ethereal every day.

Val's supposed infidelity had broken her heart. She never mentioned his name, but Aunt Rachael knew only too well the cause of the girl's fading away.

Ruth's condition filled her with alarm, in which Ephraim Barclay, who was constantly at the cottage, fully shared. They were discussing the propriety of taking Ruth away for a change, when the cab drew up.

"Who can it be?" said Aunt Rachael, wondering. "I expect no visitors. What insufferable effrontery!" she continued, indignantly, as Val Curzon jumped lightly out. "I will not—"

But the words died upon her lips as another man, the exact counterpart of Val, emerged from the stuffy little cab, followed by Algy Cavendish, who turned to assist Mrs. Curzon in making her exit from it.

"Ephraim, something of importance has happened," said Aunt Rachael, in an agitated tone. "Both my nephews are here—Mr. Cavendish, too, and Marie Benquier! What can it mean?"

"I don't know," responded Ephraim, shortly. He could very well have dispensed with the entire party.

In a few seconds the bewildered little maid had ushered the London visitors into the room.

How the subsequent explanation was got through Val never quite understood. Frederick, however, performed his part in a satisfactory manner, completely exonerating his brother from the various charges that had been brought against him.

In so doing, his wife and Algy Cavendish supported him, Algy expressing his deep regret that he had ever been induced to suspect his friend of acting dishonourably.

As if in a dream Val saw Aunt Rachael shedding tears, heard Ephraim Barclay apologising honestly and sincerely to him for the mistake into which he had fallen between the brothers, a fact which raised the Quaker in Val's estimation, since, his character as a man of honour being re-established, poor Ephraim's last hope of winning Ruth had vanished. To his credit it must be said Ephraim bore his double disappointment bravely and well.

Ruth, lying dressed upon her little white bed upstairs, with the window wide open to admit the languid air, heard the cab stop, distinguished a familiar voice amidst the hum going on below.

She was on her feet directly, her listlessness gone, her heart full of wild, sudden hope. The voice was Val's. Would he venture to come here if something had not transpired to prove him innocent and worthy of her love?

Hastily smoothing her pale golden hair, Ruth crept tremblingly downstairs, that deep musical voice thrilling through her each time it spoke. Unable to bear the suspense, she

pushed the door open and entered, looking like a pale, beautiful ghost.

"Ruth, darling! I may claim you now! There is nothing to keep us apart any longer."

Val's arms were around her, his kisses rained upon her face before them all, and Aunt Rachael made no protest. Ruth had a blissful consciousness that things had worked together for good in their case; how, she neither knew nor cared in the first flush of her restored happiness. Val was with her again; Val was innocent of the cruel charges brought against him. The bewildering joy that ensued blotted out all else for the time being.

When they had grown a little calmer, Marie Curzon stepped forward and took Ruth's hand.

"Forgive me the pain I have caused you to suffer, not wilfully, but owing to a mistake," she said, earnestly. "Your lover is in every way worthy of you, Miss Inglefield. But for me and my husband—his brother—no reflection would ever have been cast upon Valentine Curzon."

As Ruth understood more clearly what had occurred, her thankful spirit deepened, her loving trust in Val revived, never again to be shaken. Bending forward, she kissed the Frenchwoman's olive cheek.

"From henceforth we must be as sisters," she said, gently. "No, there is nothing to forgive—you were not to blame—but much to be grateful for."

Frederick Valentine Curzon left Penwyr for London that evening, the richer by a twenty-pound note, which he had borrowed (!) of his brother. It was a relief to get rid of him, and when authentic news of his death reached his relatives a year later on from the Soudan it occasioned no deep regret.

Val and Algy stayed, at Aunt Rachael's invitation, until the next day. Marie Curzon remained altogether. Aunt Rachael kindly offered the lonely, deserted young wife a home, which she was only too thankful to accept.

Val and Ruth were married as soon as the former had passed his examination creditably, and gained permission to kill people as a doctor in the orthodox way. Ruth made a charming wife; her pure, simple, yet gifted nature by degrees lending a higher tone to that of her handsome, pleasure-loving husband, raising him to the call of duty, helping him to make of him what—but for her—he would never have become—a distinguished, useful member of society.

Algy Cavendish married his Aurelia, with the happiest results. There are so many little Algy's and Aurelia's now, that in looking after them his wife has well-nigh forgotten to be strong-minded, at which Algy secretly rejoices.

The Colonel lives with them, having eschewed matrimony after that cruel exposé with regard to "the most charming woman in the world," Mrs. Wycherley, who, by the way, is still a widow, and likely to remain one.

[THE END.]

A SERIAL STORY

of Extraordinary and Vivid
Interest, entitled,

"JUDITH,"

will begin in the Next Issue of
THE LONDON READER.

Do not fail to read the opening
chapters.

"COMPANY."

The word "company" arouses quite different feelings in the minds of different women. To some it means dread and distress; to others "company" means a welcome addition to the family circle, bringing fresh social stimulus and pleasure to the home. How to smooth over the more or less disturbing domestic upheaval caused by the arrival of company is an interesting problem to all housekeepers. Anything that will make the entertaining of company easier is certainly worth knowing; and there are a few practical rules in this connection worth bearing in mind. The first rule of importance is to be always prepared in a sufficient degree for the sudden or unexpected arrival of company. This does not necessitate any great outlay—it merely means that you should never let the stores run low in ordinary things, as bread, butter, and jam, to always have some kind of cake or dainty in the house, and some tinned chicken, preserved or bottled fruits, etc., in the storeroom. Another good rule for relieving the shock and strain of company is to utilise the guest, as far as possible. This is one of the easiest things in the world. The average guest generally realises that she is in a sense a burden upon her entertainers, and is willing to do anything to help her hostess. Accept any offer to do some slight service; this will make the relations between guest and hostess most cordial and pleasant. Another point making the entertaining of company less trying is not to worry about the quality of the entertainment, so long as it is the best which in the circumstances can be provided. A hostess seldom feels satisfied with what she is able to proffer, and only worries herself by imagining what a poor opinion the guest must have of her hospitality. This impression is nearly always false, for what may seem a poor entertainment from the standpoint of the giver may seem to the recipient a royal hospitality.

CHARMING MEN AND WOMEN.

A woman's charm does not necessarily depend on beauty. Yet it must be admitted that a really charming woman is generally well-dowered in this respect. With men, charm is independent of physique. We have seen it most alluringly and subtly present in a man whose face looks as if all humanity had been vigorously playing "Aunt Sally" with it for more hours than he could count. It is independent, too, of achievement. We should perhaps describe a man of charm as one upon whom none of the finer flavours of life are wasted, who can appreciate, sympathise with, and criticise all the scenes, situations, sayings, or actions round him. It does not matter what this man does—whether he talks gossip, or tells a story, or discusses a poem, or a picture, or a play, he is charming. Of himself and his experiences he never seems to think; but he is interested in sad and happy love affairs, in the manners and conversation of his fellows, in sunsets, and the absurdities of life. Such men are the salt of human intercourse. Their gifts are the most precious of all gifts, though they die founders of nothing.

It is native and inherited, this charm, which defeats the prying investigator and eludes the cunning analyst? From generations of ancestors men and women inherit their personality. If we reflect upon the persons we know who are charming, it is ten to one that we shall find they are cultured, though we could think of dozens of cultured people who are not charming. Think of that, you women—especially you young ones—whether you are pretty or plain, and cultivate your minds in just one direction, whether you are rich or poor. Forget yourselves; open your eyes to the sights and sounds of nature; read—think. Have some impersonal aim, and your minds will be illumined. Learn something of the nature of charm, and people will learn something of charm from you.

Gleanings

VAPOUR BATHS IN FINLAND.—A person who proposes to enjoy this new form of vapour bath lies down at full length in a hammock, which is suspended over a large bath tub filled with ice-cold water. An attendant then throws into this water some hot bricks, whereupon a vapour arises and envelopes the person lying in the hammock. For some minutes the attendant allows him to remain exposed to the vapour, and then, after removing the bricks, he gives the hammock a jerk, and the gentleman in it comes plump down into cold water. Those who have tried this method of bathing say that the sensation is quite novel, and that the sudden plunge into the cold water really invigorates one.

LARGEST BELL IN THE WORLD.—What is perhaps the largest hanging bell in the world is to be seen in Mandalay. This is the Mingun Bell, and on the right bank of the Irrawaddy, almost opposite the city of Mandalay. This immense bell measures as follows:—Height to crown, 12 ft.; 21 ft. high to the top of the griffin-like monsters; diameter at the lip, 16 ft. 3 ins.; thickness of metal, from 6 ins. to 12 ins. It weighs about 80 tons. It is suspended on three massive round beams of teak placed horizontally the one over the other, their ends resting on two pillars of enormous size, composed of masonry and large upright teak posts. This bell was cast at the end of the 18th century under the superintendence of the reigning king.

CARELESS CORRESPONDENCE.—A gentleman and his wife had been invited to an evening party. He wanted to go, but his wife declared that she had no gown suitable for the occasion, and asked him to send "regrets" to their hostess. Thereupon the man, while at his office, penned this facetious note: "We regret that your kind invitation must be declined for all the conventional reasons, but the real reason is that half the family has nothing to wear. My wife's latest dress is over three weeks' old, and her hat is twelve hours out of date. You will appreciate the hopelessness of the occasion and excuse us." He thought this so good that he went further, and determined to be smartly sarcastic at the expense of his wife. He wrote a note to her explaining that he would not be at home for an early dinner, as she had asked him. The note ran: "I can not accept your invitation because I am going out to an evening party where the guests are not expected to wear anything of importance. Sorry I won't be there to kiss you good-night." Unfortunately he was careless; the notes went into the wrong envelopes, and the lady who had invited the couple was somewhat surprised at the man's audacity.

SOME HINTS.—Suppose a man is thought to have sustained a fracture, say of arm or leg, he must be carefully and gently treated from the first. He should be carried to a quiet place, and, if an examination is to be made, his clothes must be cut off—ripped up at the seams—and not taken off. We can imagine the pain which would be caused by the attempt to take off his coat if his arm were broken. Indeed, the one idea we should keep in mind is that a simple fracture may be made very much worse if we allow any undue movements to take place in the broken bone. In the case of a man with a broken leg, imagine what would be likely to happen if some foolish or ignorant person lifted him up and set him on his feet. Very likely the broken end of the bone would come through the skin, and then we should get a much more serious accident—a compound fracture (that is, one with a wound) in place of a simple one. We can all see the necessity, then, for the most gentle treatment of every case in which a bone is suspected of being broken. Our duty, in fact, is to take measures to keep the parts at rest, to put the bone as nearly as we can in its natural position, and to secure it against disturbance. This is what should be done pending the arrival of the doctor.

WOMEN CRIMINALS.—The case of Emma Byron, the Bootle murderess, and the arrest of Madame Humbert, have brought the subject of crime among women prominently before the public during the last few weeks. Statistics prove that at present the number of criminal women is considerably less in proportion than that of male criminals. In France the number of criminals tried annually in the term of five years was 200 males per million of population, and 40 females. In the German Empire, according to the returns of 1886, the proportion of women convicts was less than 18 per cent. of the total number. In Italy, out of 68,828 prisoners in 1887, 5,473 were females. In the United States a late census gives 54,190 males and 5,068 females. In Great Britain the number of criminal women is disproportionately large. In 1834 the ratio of women in the criminal population of England was one in five; of late years it has exceeded one in four.

"HALL MARKED."—No manufacturer of gold and silver plate in England is permitted to sell, and no member would even attempt to purchase a piece of silver or gold plate, that had not received the "hall-mark." This symbol is stamped upon every section of plate, and is an absolute guarantee of the purity of the metal. "Hall-marking" is protected by the legislature. Fraudulent hall-marking is so heavily punishable an offence, that attempts to deceive the public by means of spurious hall-marks are practically unknown. Probably few articles can be so easily adulterated as silver and gold, and were there so such protection as hall-marking in vogue, the public would be extensively defrauded, as the purity of the metals cannot be determined by cursory examination, but only by elaborate testing. For gold articles, the standard marks are a crown and the carat number for the two highest carat standards—twenty-two and eighteen carats respectively—this number being followed by decimals representing the proportion of gold in the alloy for the fifteen, twelve, and nine-carat quantities. The number is followed by the symbol or mark of the assaying office, which in the case of Birmingham is an anchor, while the year in which the assay was made is represented by a letter. At last come the manufacturers' initials. Every article submitted to the Assay Office is returned marked. If it does not correspond to the manufacturer's statement of the carat value, it is smashed to pieces, and returned to the manufacturer in fragments to be re-made.

PADEREWSKI'S BUMPS.—M. Paderewski has recently passed through the hands of a phrenologist. His organs of tune and time were discovered to be powerfully developed, and these are conjoined to other powerfully developed organs which give philosophic comprehensiveness of all that is understood of the science and philosophy of music, harmony, technique, and instrumental manipulation. But to be a musical genius requires something more than large tune. Though highly nervous and finely organised, M. Paderewski possesses exceptionally large executive powers, combined with well-developed firmness, giving him wonderful physical tenacity, executiveness of purpose, firmness, steady perseverance, persistence, determination, and great powers of endurance. Though apparently somewhat reserved, Paderewski possesses a very friendly, warm-hearted, social, domestic, and sympathetic disposition, is genial, courteous, and adaptable; has rather large mirthfulness, disposing him to manifest a keen discernment of humour and the incongruity of things. His acquisitiveness is large, giving him much sense of carefulness and industry and a provident disposition. He has a strong endowment of imagination, is ingenious, constructive, and prolific of ideas, yet is not wanting in practicability. Has a fair degree of hope and cheerfulness of disposition, yet is somewhat subject to experiencing extremes of feeling. In short, it seems that Paderewski is as nearly perfect as a human being can be.

THE MOST NUTRITIOUS.

EPPS'S

GRATEFUL—COMFORTING.

COCOA

BREAKFAST—SUPPER.

DON'T COUGH for
KEATING'S LOZENGES
EASILY CURE
THE WORST COUGH.

One gives relief. An increasing sale of over 80 years is a certain test of their value. Sold in 13jd. tins everywhere.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR EYES

It is impossible to take too much care of one's eyes, and those who value their eyesight will do well to send to **STEPHEN GREEN, 210, Lambeth Road, London**, for a little book "How to Preserve the Eyesight," which tells the story of a cure for all troubles of the eyes, eyelashes, and eyelids. **SINGLETON'S EYE OINTMENT** has proved its virtues during 300 years, and it may be obtained of all chemists and stores in ancient pedestal pots for 2/- each.

FWS

FRUIT STONES AS FUEL.—In California it is found that peach stones burn as well as the best coal, and give out more heat in proportion to weight. The stones taken out of the fruit that is tinned and dried are collected, and sold at the rate of twenty-four shillings a ton. Apricot stones also burn, but not so well as peach, and do not command so good a price.

SOME MILLIONAIRES' BABIES.—A resourceful New York newspaper has provided its readers with the following list of millionaires' children and their prospects:—Margaret Carnegie, aged 5, who got a 2,500,000 dollar house on Fifth Avenue for a Christmas gift; John Nicholas Brown, aged 2, who is the richest baby in the United States, having 15,000,000 dollars invested in his own name; Isabella Rockefeller, aged 6 months, who will inherit many millions, and is now living in a rented cottage in the country; William Henry Vanderbilt, aged 1, who is the principal heir to the Vanderbilt fortune and may get 100,000,000 dollars; William A. Clark, aged 1 month, who got a Christmas present of 1,000,000 dollars from his grandfather just for being born a boy; Flora Payne Whitney, aged 5, who will receive millions from her father and more millions from her mother, who was a Vanderbilt; William Vincent Astor, aged 11, who has always suffered from ill-health, and is living in his lonesome villa at Tuxedo; Lolita Armour, aged 5, who, thanks to Dr. Lorenza and her father's millions, is now in a fair way to become strong and healthy; Baby Mackay, aged 1, who will inherit a fortune of 50,000,000 dollars.

Helpful Talks

BY THE EDITOR.

The Editor is pleased to hear from his readers at any time.

All letters must give the name and address of the writers, not for publication, but as a guarantee of good faith.

ANXIOUS.—If you can prove that you purchased the goods with your own means, and not from money that your husband gave you for housekeeping purposes, you can stop him selling the furniture.

CONSTANT READER FOR TWENTY YEARS.—There is nothing that will prevent the growth of hair on the lip. A fortune awaits the person who discovers a remedy for this disfigurement to a woman.

RACHEL H.—There is no way consistent with self-respect except to leave him to himself until he comes round again. If he really cares for you he will be sure to come after you. Do not be impatient.

ONE IN LOVE.—If she cannot throw a modest intimation of her feelings into her tones, her looks, her manner, then she is unlike the rest of her sex. But she must guard against seeming bold or over-sentimental. Delicacy is a girl's best charm. Any want of refinement and modesty shocks a well-bred man.

LUCY.—You should bear in mind that your lover is only a boy of twenty, and is, therefore, not his own master. When he becomes a man of full age perhaps he will show more firmness and independence of character. In the meantime you ought to be kind and forbearing towards him, or else give him up altogether.

NORL.—Axminster, in Devon, is well known on account of its very rich and beautiful carpets, woven in one piece, which rivalled those of Turkey and Persia. The town is believed to have existed from very early times.

ETIQUETTE.—Such matters are to a great extent controlled by custom. Religious persons naturally conform to the usages of the church which they attend. Those who are not religious are not expected to bow their heads during prayers.

JACK.—Wagers or bets depending upon any contingent event are unlawful, and all contracts on account of money wagered are void. In most wagers the stakes are deposited with a third person, called the stakeholder, to await the result. In some countries the loser may sue both the stakeholder and winner for the amount he wagered.

JEAN.—Christmas is a combination of the two words, Christ and mass, and is so named in contradistinction to the other Church festivals of the year, such as Candlemas, Michaelmas, etc., its signification being a mass for Christ, one of the oldest observances of the day being a celebration of a mass commencing at midnight, and which may be celebrated three times during the day, an honour accorded no other day in the Church calendar.

WOULD-BE SOLDIER.—A brigade consists of two or more regiments of troops under the command of a brigadier-general. A regiment usually consists of ten companies of troops under the command of a colonel, and a company consists of from sixty to one hundred men, under the command of a captain. It is seldom that every company in a regiment has its full complement of men; and hence brigades vary as to the number of troops they contain.

NORA.—A young lady should not accept presents from a gentleman to whom she is not engaged, unless he is a near relative.

THE LONDON READER is sent to any part of the world, post free Three-halfpence Weekly or Quarterly, One Shilling and Eightpence.

ALL LETTERS TO BE ADDRESSED TO THE EDITOR OF THE LONDON READER, 50-52, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C.

We cannot undertake to return rejected manuscripts.

THE ORIGINAL KEARSLEY'S 100 YEARS REPUTATION WIDOW WELCH'S FEMALE PILLS

Awarded Certificate of Merit for the cure of Irregularities, Amenorrhoea, and all Female Complaints. They have the approval of the Medical Profession. Beware of imitations. The only genuine and original are in White Paper Wrappers. Boxes, 1s. 1/4d. and 2s. 6d. of all Chemists. 2s. 6d. box contains three times the pills. Or by post 4s. or 3s. stamps, by the makers, C. and G. KEARSLEY, 15, North Street, Westminster. Sold in the Colonies.

FOR OVER 75 YEARS

TOWLE'S PILLS

FOR LADIES

TO BE HAD OF ALL CHEMISTS IN BOXES 1/6, 2/9 or 4/6 or sent anywhere on receipt of 15.34 or 35 1/2 stamps by E.T. TOWLE & CO. 56, LONG ROW, NOTTINGHAM.

SULPHOLINE SHILLING BOTTLES

A SPOTLESS SKIN.
A BEAUTIFUL COMPLEXION.
ERUPTIONS, PIMPLES
ENTIRELY FADE AWAY.

LOTION PEPPER'S TONIC

Promotes Appetite.

CURES DYSPESIA, HYSTERIA, NERVOUS COMPLAINTS.

SHILLING BOTTLES.

NO MORE CHAPS.

BEETHAM'S *Sarola*

NO MORE ROUGH HANDS.



IS UNEQUALLED FOR PRESERVING THE SKIN AND COMPLEXION

FROM THE EFFECTS OF FROST, COLD WINDS, & HARD WATER.

IT REMOVES AND PREVENTS ALL

Roughness, Redness, & Chaps,

AND KEEPS THE SKIN

SOFT, SMOOTH & WHITE AT ALL SEASONS.

If used after Dancing, or visiting heated apartments, it will be found DELIGHTFULLY COOLING AND REFRESHING.

Bottles, 6d., 1s., and 2s. 6d., of all Chemists.
M. BEETHAM & SON, Cheltenham.



DR. J. COLLIS BROWNE'S CHLORODYNE

COUGHS, COLDS, ASTHMA, BRONCHITIS.

DR. J. COLLIS BROWNE'S CHLORODYNE is a liquid medicine which allays PAIN OF EVERY KIND, affords a calm, refreshing sleep WITHOUT HEADACHE, and invigorates the nervous system when exhausted.

DR. J. COLLIS BROWNE'S CHLORODYNE.—Vice-Chancellor Sir W. PAGE WOOD stated publicly in Court that Dr. J. COLLIS BROWNE was undoubtedly the INVENTOR OF CHLORODYNE, that the whole story of the defendant Freeman was deliberately untrue, and he regretted to say it had been sworn to.—See The Times, July 13th, 1884.

DR. J. COLLIS BROWNE'S CHLORODYNE is the TRUE PALLIATIVE in NEURALGIA, GOUT, CANCER, TOOTHACHE, RHEUMATISM.

Published by the Proprietors at 50-52, Ludgate Hill, and Printed by CLEMENTS PRINTING WORKS, LTD., Newspaper Buildings, Portugal Street, Strand, W.C.

IS THE GREAT SPECIFIC FOR DIARRHOEA, DYSENTERY, CHOLERA.

GENERAL BOARD OF HEALTH, London, REPORT that it ACTS as a CHARM, one dose generally sufficient.

Dr. GIBBON, Army Medical Staff, Calcutta, states:—"TWO DOSES COMPLETELY CURED ME OF DIARRHOEA."

DR. J. COLLIS BROWNE'S CHLORODYNE rapidly cuts short all attacks of EPILEPSY, SPASMS, COLIC, PALPITATION, HYSTERIA.

IMPORTANT CAUTION.—The IMMENSE SALE of this REMEDY has given rise to many UNSCRUPULOUS IMITATIONS. Be careful to observe TRADE MARK. Of all Chemists, 1/4, 2/6, and 4/6. Sole Manufacturer—J. T. DAVENPORT, 33, Great Russell Street, London, W.C.